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SUPERINTENDENTS AND THE MICROPOLITICS OF INNOVATION IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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SUPERINTENDENTS AND THE MICROPOLITICS OF INNOVATION IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

By

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Lexington, Kentucky

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2019

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

SUPERINTENDENTS AND THE MICROPOLITICS OF
INNOVATION IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Research shows that public school districts that follow traditional means of instruction and assessment are insufficiently preparing students for success in the today's global world. As a result, students are entering into higher education institutions and the workforce without the necessary skills to succeed in these 21st century environments. Extant literature suggest that there is a broad consensus on this perspective in public and private sectors nationally and globally. Evidence shows that some school district superintendents and their respective school boards continue to focus on improving the current practices and student academic performance and assessment. Other instructional leaders recognize that their current systems may insufficiently equip students for their futures. Despite financial challenges, state regulations, and limitations of traditional community expectations, these leaders introduce and support innovative education programs that offer extraordinary college and career preparatory opportunities. Some of these innovative districts are recognized by their respective state Departments of Education such as the districts represented in this study that are recognized as Kentucky Districts of Innovation (DOI).

This exploratory, multiple-case study examines how several rural Kentucky school districts address these challenges. They've designed, developed, and supported innovative programs to prepare their students for success in post-secondary education and future careers. The researcher examined a wide array of documents, including program applications, district budgetary documents, strategic plans, website information as well as conducted six interviews of three rural Kentucky superintendents and either their respective board chairs or a school board member. An analysis of these data identified leadership characteristics of these superintendents, their relationships with their board members, and how these relationships effect the design, development, and continuous support for innovation.

The researcher identified four common themes: student preparation, rural identity, cultures of innovation, and communication. Both superintendent and board members created change to prepare students for their future. The superintendents closely identified with and leveraged their intimate knowledge of their respective rural communities to align education innovations to meet community needs. Superintendents nurtured cultures of innovation that encouraged and accepted informed risk-taking at all levels of the district. In turn, their boards of education supported these innovative efforts through the allocation of resources as well as positive patronage in local communities. Further, effective communication patterns supported positive relationships and built trust with their respective boards and communities.

Findings from this study support the notion that complex decision-making processes that support education innovation begin with the school board's decision to hire a school district superintendent. The support continues as the board also is well-educated about innovative practices, provides advice, and supports the district's education initiatives. It is also evident that superintendents who lead their respective district's education innovation initiatives are well-informed by extant literature, exemplary practice, and have the political acuity to ensure that they work in concert with their local boards of education. In conclusion, superintendents and the relationships they had with their school boards of education directly affected innovation efforts within these rural Kentucky Districts of Innovation.

Keywords: Superintendent, Micropolitics, Leadership, Rural, Innovation

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October 31, 2019
Date

SUPERINTENDENTS AND THE MICROPOLITICS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS OF INNOVATION

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DEDICATION PAGE

To those crazy enough to think they can change the world.

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Many people have influenced my education through formal and informal instruction. I grew up as an only child of a single-parent, elementary school teacher, and my childhood was immersed with bulletin boards, tiny desks, and her long hours grading papers. My mother is one of four sisters who became elementary school teachers, and I vividly recall discussions around my maternal grandmother's kitchen table about their undergraduate papers, masters theses, and classroom learning strategies. My grandmother, Mary Catherine Thompson, was a firm believer in the power of higher education and told me early on as a child that I was to "go to college on scholarship." She stated that I would attend Transylvania University, just as she told her eight children that they would attend and graduate Western Kentucky University. Lee Etta Carver Nunn was my paternal grandmother, an elementary education graduate of WKU, and taught third-grade in a rural elementary school. I am the proud owner of her teaching certificate, her KEA pin, and a 20-year silver tray gifted to her by the local board of education. She asked me to finish this degree in the last conversation I had with her, and so I am.

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This document marks the completion of a five-year immersive experience that began when Dr. Beth Rous believed that even with a non-traditional background, I could succeed as an Education Leadership Studies doctoral student. To my chair, Dr. Lars Bjork, who appreciated my business background in the education space, encouraged me to think differently, to speak up, and to challenge the status quo. I deeply appreciate conversations with Dr. Tricia Browne-Ferrigno and Dr. Jonathan Thomas, who provided me with academic support and words of encouragement at critical moments. I also want to thank members of my cohort who became my friends and supported me through this journey.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Individuals and firms in the global information age must be able to understand complex problems and adapt to rapid changes by developing multiple ways of working, thinking, and problem solving (World Economic Forum, 2016). In response to these external pressures, state education systems have attempted to adjust to the demands of a global economy and produce knowledge workers equipped with higher-order thinking skills, the ability to effectively communicate, and the ability to collaborate in solving complex problems (Kuncel, Hezlett, & Ones, 2004). Preparing today's students for tomorrow's world of work is becoming more challenging for public schools. In many instances, students are educated in school-based learning environments that reflect neither their personal world of infused technology and ubiquitous information (Apple, 2008) nor the dynamic, fast-paced, creative needs of solving tomorrow's problems (Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015). Wagner and Dintersmith state that traditional instructional programs are no longer sufficient to meet the growing needs of a global, digital economy and require fundamental changes in learning, teaching, and leading districts.

Today’s public school district superintendents face the dilemma of choosing between preparing students for higher academic performance on standardized tests that enable them to succeed in post-secondary education or preparing them to meet the workforce demands of the future. Superintendents serve in positions that are at the nexus of meeting the education reform requirements of their respective state, the federal government, and local school districts. Many district superintendents face competing

demands of meeting state and federal requirements to acquire adequate financial resources, responding to external political pressure focused on preserving traditional curricula and instructional methods, as well as leading innovative educational initiatives (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014; Kotter, 2012). Although superintendents and local board members have the resources and discretion to create opportunities for change that meet the future needs of students and stakeholders (Björk 2000; Kirst 1994), some maintain the status quo, others may obstruct change, and a few embrace the notion of innovation in their districts (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014; Björk & Gurley, 2005; Murphy, 1995). In many instances, education designed to prepare tomorrow's global workforce remains unaddressed, except in a select number of districts that understand and actively support organizational change and innovation (Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015).

Context of the Study

Kentucky's public education system is comprised predominantly of small, rural school districts, and many face challenges such as operating within restricted budgets that contribute to difficult and often politicized resource and allocation decisions. Resource allocation and redistribution remains a central issue in supporting key instructional initiatives (Lavalley, 2017). Supporting innovation within rural districts creates added pressure on decision-makers who want to implement new ideas, programs, and instructional strategies while faced with the unyielding reality of maintaining key operational activities. This study focused on rural school district superintendents and board members who create, support and sustain meaningful change despite facing a wide array of challenges. Ten of 173 Kentucky school districts have been designated as

Districts of Innovation by the Kentucky Department of Education and have infused new processes, programs, and personnel distribution to affect student outcomes that required changing in district allocations (Alsbury, 2008). Innovative decision-making processes of these Districts of Innovation (DOI) provides an opportunity unique in time and place to understand the nature of superintendent-school board decision-making processes of rural school districts.

Statement of the Problem

In the mid-19th century, public education focused on serving rural, agricultural populations. As the nation's economy shifted from an agricultural to an industrial base in the late 19th century, the nature of organizations and work changed, and a need for a literate and numerate workforce grew. As the nation's population became increasingly urban, the size and complexity of schools also increased. In response, public school districts altered how they were organized, whom they served, and the nature and scope of education programs. A similar dynamic between the demands of today's economy and public education is evident, as is the need to develop a creative citizenry through the creation of innovative learning environments. Today's post-industrial economy demands knowledge workers rather than skilled labor doing repetitive factory tasks. These workers need to have creativity, the ability to solve problems, be flexible, and have an entrepreneurial spirit (Friedman, 2007). Understanding how public schools adapt to the changing needs of society and the economy is of considerable interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. Some scholars view the dynamic relationship between school district superintendents and their boards of education as impactful and highly political (Björk & Blase, 2010; Delagardelle, 2006).

Micropolitics, superintendents, and school boards. The decision-making processes of superintendents and their boards greatly affect student outcomes via the micropolitical interactions between the two parties and how these interactions result in supporting changes to instructional programs (Delagardelle, 2006). While local school boards of education assume responsibilities to focus on governance and policy, superintendents are responsible for administratively implementing policies by hiring, monitoring student academic performance, taxes, communication, projects, and employee oversight (Kowalski, 1993). Although their respective roles are distinct in practice, they are closely intertwined (Björk & Gurley, 2003). For example, superintendent activities include managing the day-to-day operations of the district as well as working with the local school board on all district-related matters. In working with the board, superintendents spend much of their time communicating with them, thereby exhibiting two dominant roles, including serving as a professional advisor (48%) and decision-maker (49.5%) (Brunner et al., 2002). Additionally, superintendents share policymaking responsibilities and decision making with their board members, who ultimately represent their respective communities' interests (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000).

> "Superintendents spend 80% of their time in verbal interaction transmitting technical information, formal rules and regulations, past experiences of the district, perceived preferences of individuals inside and outside the organization and projected possible consequences of decisions and conditions by different constituencies" (Björk, 1993, p. 251).

Interactions between superintendents and their board members reflect a level of continuous micropolitical activity that occurs to carry out their respective responsibilities effectively.

Decisions made by superintendents and their board members directly impact the functions of the school district. For instance, the support of the district, whether through resource allocation decisions, creation of district policy, or the creation of district goals, missions, and visions, affects district outcomes. In addition, researchers concur that school district superintendents and local school boards have a significant and direct impact on student achievement. According to Kowalski (2006), there is no more important relationship that affects student learning than the relationship between superintendents and board members. Superintendents and board members are largely responsible for allocating resources to support the mission and goals of their respective school districts. Successful school districts function well because of from proper allocation of resources such as time, money, and personnel directed to support student achievement and instructional goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Boards of education have a direct impact on student achievement and district performance. For example, Delagardelle's (2006) research found that school boards' decisions have a significant influence on student achievement, particularly regarding articulating higher expectations for student academic performance as well as supporting the improvement of teaching and learning. Importantly, school boards influence district culture through the hiring of superintendents to lead, manage and support these goals. Waters and Marzano's (2006) research findings suggest there is a statistical significance among effective superintendents who work with their boards to establish collaborative goal-setting patterns and who are involved indirectly monitoring the results against the goals set for achievement and instruction. Superintendents who recruit and retain effective staff, properly supervise and evaluate building-level leaders, and financially support

instructional initiatives characteristic of instructionally effective school districts (Björk, 1993). Micropolitics involves the navigation of various interests and the resource distribution process in successful education reform contexts (Mawhinney, 1999). Decisions made by school boards and superintendents directly support and have an impact on the district's vision, instructional programs, direction for student learning, policy, and provisions of resources for improvement efforts (Delagardelle, 2006).

Change leadership in innovative education contexts. The concept of change leadership provides insight into how meaningful organizational change is implemented and sustained. Understanding how leaders influence others is key to understanding how superintendents in Kentucky's rural school districts accomplish innovative change. Root-Bernstein (2003) explains innovation as problem-solving through the use of fantasy or imagination to find the most optimal solution, albeit when discussing sciences and the arts. Simonton (2003) posits that those open to creativity and innovation are not merely born as "creative geniuses" with the characteristics allowing for creative potential. Rather, creative people are created through circumstances such as education, training, family background, and sociocultural contexts that encourage individuals to produce or introduce original and functional ideas (Simonton, 2003).

Innovation in education has historically referred to reform efforts at the local, state, or national level, and in most instances, focuses on addressing the challenges such as student achievement, closing achievement or equity gaps, increasing high school participation, or lowering drop-out rates (USDOE, OII). Innovation in business refers to the creation or implementation of new ideas, processes, or products. The process of change in both types of organizations requires leaders and followers who are open to

functioning differently, working together towards a mutual goal, and willing to compromise and consider the varying interests of those involved (Rost, 1991). Individuals who lead organizational members through a meaningful change process create circumstances that facilitate rather than force change and embody characteristics that enable a respectful transition for all involved. Establishing a conceptual framework for innovative leadership in education will help guide readers through the elements of recreating future innovative educational environments. The researcher identified and summarized common themes found in business and education definitions of innovation include: (a) a new idea, method, or product; (b) represents change, renewal, or transformation; and (c) focuses on improvement. The researcher created the operational definition of innovation in education for this study that is based on the work of several scholars, which will be *a new or creative idea, program, process, or strategy that changes, transforms, or improves the performance of a current system of practice* (Cady, 2007; Horth & Buchner, 2014; Howells, 2000; Rogers, 2003;Slater & Narver, 1995).

Accordingly, when evaluating innovation or innovative leadership in education for the purpose of this research, essential elements must be present: (a) the idea, program, process, or strategy should be new to the environment; (b) the idea, program, process, or strategy should change, transform, or improve; and (c) a current system or practice should exist to be transformed, replaced, or advanced. Fully understanding the characteristics of an innovative superintendent, the choices made to create meaningful change, and the fostering of creative cultures will prove useful in the exploration of the innovative process of the Kentucky Districts of Innovation within the study.

Superintendent as innovative leader. The landscape of education has become increasingly complex, and the role of the superintendent has changed from a management role to one managing instructional change. Callahan (1966) identifies four stages in the evolution of the superintendency that contributed to the definition of their key roles. The superintendent's role evolved from a primary focus on instruction (1850–1900) to that of a manager as the nation expanded from an agricultural to an industrial economy (1900–1930). The role of serving as educational statesmen emerged as citizens demanded a choice in school district decisions (1930–1950), and then evolved into one of a social scientist (1950–1967) due to the need to ensure equal opportunity and access to a high quality of education for all students. Kowalski (2006) added a fifth role, a communicator to internal and external stakeholders (1950–2003). Over time, each of these roles may have varying degrees of importance; however, all remain relevant (Björk, Kowalski, & Young, 2005).

As the nature of education has become more complex, the role of the superintendent (Björk & Gurley, 2005) has become increasingly political, particularly regarding working with citizen-elected school boards (Björk, 2008; Björk, Kowalski, & Young, 2005; Wirt & Kirst, 1992). In the past, school boards were directly involved in school district management and instructional decisions. Today, the main responsibility of state and local school boards is to set education policy that superintendents implement and also provide appropriate oversight of how the district is managed and led. Local school boards hire superintendents, set budgets for their districts, and serve as a community liaison for the schools (Hoyle et al., 2005). School boards have the authority to approve or reject capital and instructional expenditures, which can affect overall

instructional improvement. Superintendents and school board members are established as key figures in the management of school districts and viewed as guardians of our nation's schools. Although superintendents often describe their relationship with school boards as challenging, their collaboration leads to important decisions about improving instructional environments for both students and teachers. During recent years, the influence of community members (i.e., concerned taxpayers, parents, school board members, industry leaders, and elected officials) has expanded, and they have become more involved in education policymaking processes making them increasingly complex and decidedly political. Their political influence has also increased through their serving as educational advisors to state and national government agencies (Brunner & Björk 2001; Kowalski, 1999). Brunner and Björk (2001) further explain that superintendents must work with communities and schools, communicate with elected officials, special interests, and board members to inform, effectively allocate resources, and generate support during times of change.

There is a distinct need for highly-effective leaders, particularly during times of change. Change contexts involve many stakeholders, including board members, building-level leaders, community leaders, parents, teachers, and students (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014). In times of education reform and organizational change, "effective superintendents engage all relevant stakeholders, including central office staff, building-level administrators, and board members, in establishing non-negotiable goals [for achievement and instruction] for their district" (Waters & Marzano, 2006, p. 11).

The relationship between a district superintendent and individual school board member is described by Alsbury (2008) as the respectable engagement between the two

parties during the decision-making processes. When this relationship is successful, it contributes to improving student academic achievement. In addition, Delagardelle (2006) found that the superintendents and board members who are in high performing districts have mutually trusting relationships, which allow them to evaluate, scrutinize, and motivate their entire team towards progress. Effective boards in higher-performing districts support the superintendent by investing the time to fully understand student achievement data and support changes in district direction, including the reallocation of resources. Finally, board members supported their district superintendents by connecting with their communities to promote community involvement as well as ensure proper distribution of responsibility and engagement across all district-level leaders to increase student academic achievement. In sum, innovation in education and improving student academic achievement requires a wide array of community and district engagement as well as positive superintendent and board members relations (Björk, 2008).

Study Purpose and Significance

Heightened expectations for student academic achievement call for superintendents to enact a decidedly different set of role characteristic in addition to managing districts. Current circumstances require the knowledge and skills needed to lead and transform today's schools to enable students to have successful future careers and to be global citizens (Wagner, 2010). Education reforms continue to move forward on national and state levels, with varying levels of success. The success of Kentucky education reform provides a unique opportunity to better understand the role of superintendents as advocates for reform as well as the micropolitical aspects of implementing change. Scholars posit that school boards play an indirect role in the

success of students through providing policy (Lutz & Iannaccone, 1986), and a supportive environment for the superintendent (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Iannaccone, 1996), which ultimately affect school culture and student achievement (Albury, 2008; Shelton 2010). By examining the micropolitical relationships between superintendents and their boards within the Kentucky Districts of Innovation, this study highlights certain characteristics of superintendents, boards, and their relationships and to contribute to the body of knowledge on education leadership, organizational change, and innovation in education.

The literature on the influence of leadership on the process innovation and change is a relatively unexplored field. Although innovation exists in schools and districts across the United States (Wagner, 2010), little extensive peer-reviewed research exists to support education leaders' practice of and process for implementing innovation (Björk , 2008; Björk & Gurley, 2005; Blasé & Björk, 2010; Lindle, 1995). Consequently, empirical research concerning superintendent-school board relations as a dimension of leadership that contributes to creating and sustaining innovation or change in education are scarce. In particular, few studies focus on micropolitical decision-making processes involving district-level leaders and their boards engaged in change efforts. Various state departments of education programs focus on recognizing innovation within their districts and schools, although exploratory studies about these district-level leaders and their decision-making processes are nearly non-existent. Moreover, during the last several decades existing innovative education leadership research is criticized for being inadequate, too theoretical, or unsophisticated (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). Research about transformational leadership, effective leadership, and change leadership are abundant, yet

a systematic study of innovation or innovative leadership does not exist and is considered an unchartered territory in innovation studies (Shavinina, 2011).

Research Questions

To prepare today's students for tomorrow's jobs, innovative education leaders are expected to foster environments that are conducive to and create learning environments that will inspire student academic performance essential to their future success (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Vockley, M., 2006). The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand superintendent-school board relations in rural districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation. The research questions that guide this study are:

1. Are there common characteristics among superintendents within rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)?
2. Are there similarities in the relationships between board members and their superintendents in rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)?

This research seeks to understand the executive decision-making among rural Superintendents and their board members who engaged in meaningful change processes.

Study Design Overview

The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand superintendents' decision-making processes in innovative educational contexts. Case study is an appropriate research method to understand the contextual relationship of why or how this phenomenon occurred (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Further, cases selected are bound

together by time, place, and program as rural districts recognized as innovative during 2013 and 2016 by a Kentucky Department of Education program (Creswell, 2003). To best explore a variety of circumstances, individuals, and programs, as an emerging researcher, Yazan (2015) provided a comprehensive overview of three prominent methodologists: Yin (2002), Merriam (1998), and Stake (1995). Yin (2003), a positivist, suggests exploratory case study for situations of uncertain outcomes, and that multiple-case study can be used to explore the differences and similarities among carefully selected cases drawing a level of predictability, patterns, and thus conclusions. Stake (1995), a constructivist, suggests using case study as a way to leverage the researchers' truth to determine and construct reality for readers, realizing there are multiple realities to report. Merriam (1998), also a constructivist, also suggests that reality is beholden to the perspective of the researcher. She states that although there are many realities, the researcher should report on their interpretation of the world. She suggests using cross-case analysis, which requires more than a superficial recognition of similarities among the cases. It requires a deeper understanding of the context in which the case is situated to develop a sophisticated understanding and conclusion (Merriam, 1998). This exploratory multiple-case study reflects several methodological approaches described by the situational, interpretive leanings of Merriam (2009), Stake (1995) and Yin's (2002) pattern-seeking in cases of uncertain outcomes.

Data collection will include documents (applications and evaluations, documents, media, board notes, budgets) and moderately scheduled interviews with the superintendents and school board chairs who served in designated Kentucky Districts of Innovation. The multiple-case study approach will enable the researcher to examine why

superintendents choose to innovate and how superintendents' and their respective board members' relationships and decision-making processes.

Potential Limitations

This exploratory study of the micropolitical relationships among rural superintendents and their board members will examine a small number of rural school districts designated as Kentucky Districts of Innovation (DOI). The data for this study will be collected from rural districts that are economically distressed and lead by superintendents white males, ages 46-56. Further, this study will address the micropolitical relationships between superintendents and school board members. The study will not address the relationships among district and building-level leaders whose leadership and decision-making about resource allocation also ensure program successes within each situation. Finally, this study includes only districts recognized by one state program, but not those districts whose innovative work began before the establishment of the Districts of Innovation program nor those districts who continue their innovative work or are involved in other state-recognized programs since 2016. Although the findings cannot be generalized across all districts in Kentucky or the United States, this study may create opportunities for future research in other states, economies, demographics, district sizes, geographies, district positions, and instructional achievements.

Summary

The introductory chapter has provided an overview of this study. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature on national and state education reform contexts, the Kentucky Districts of Innovation program, leadership, innovation, as well as

superintendent-board relations and micropolitics that provides a conceptual framework through which we may better understand superintendent- board relations in innovation and change contexts. Chapter 3 describes the multiple-case study approach and the research methods employed to gather data to answer the research questions posed. The chapter addresses site selection, district background information, superintendent characteristics, as well as plans for human rights protection, data analysis, quality assurance, and the role of the researcher. Chapter 4 will provide study findings and research themes. The opportunity is evident for future studies based on an opportunity to study other state innovation in education programs or innovative district-level cultures, to develop an innovative leadership in education theory, or to conduct a larger-scale quantitative study focusing on the effects of innovative decision-making in education; these will be discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The United States education system has changed over time to meet the needs and demands of its citizenry and, as the national economy, government, and politics have changed, so has the role of the school district in its local, state, and national environments (Firestone & Riehl, 2005). Federal, state, and local education reform efforts have focused on the quality and relevance of preparing students for tomorrow's world. The current transition to an information age creates a need for systematic change to unlearn established practices in education and industry (Stone, 2002). Survival of today's companies depend on a timely reinvention of systems, procedures, cultures, and thought, and as today's businesses dramatically change, so too must today's organizations that prepare these workers (Kotter, 2012). Education leaders are called to provide their students with traditional mathematics and language arts knowledge as well as opportunities to learn soft skills like communication, problem-solving, interpersonal skills, self-directional skills, global awareness, financial, economic and business literacy, entrepreneurial thinking, and civic literacy skills (Reimers, 2009). Further, some global enterprises deem high school diplomas insufficient or irrelevant to today's workspace. P12 education leaders are now challenged to prepare all students for entry into two- or four-year post-secondary education institutions to provide students advanced specialized skills for a greater chance of entry into the global workplace.

Although United States business leaders ask that students prepare for environments of innovation, flexible systems, and new ideas, national and state education reform efforts have historically focused on standardized education, student assessment

performance, and teacher preparation (NCES, 2003). National education leaders have primarily been concerned with efforts towards student results on state, national, and global standardized tests such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015). Education reform that focuses on assessment rather than preparing students for the global economy puts our economic and civil future in jeopardy, and the pace of education reform efforts is not aligning to the speed and demands of today's world. Wagner and Dintersmith explain that, as our federal and state governments distribute expectations for a specific model of education, some districts and schools have chosen to address a new vision of education in the 21st century. Fullan and Edwards (2017) agree, stating as pressure mounts for stronger test results, education reform efforts such as the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) and *Every Student Succeeds Act* (2015) are the wrong solutions. Preparing our students to compete in a global world requires instilling a spirit of innovation and creativity, ultimately calling for a cultural foundation of change in our educational system.

Education Reform in the United States

National reform efforts tried to prepare students for tomorrow's world but have been considered ineffective. For example, in an attempt to close the achievement gap, the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002* (NCLB) was legislated to benefit the learning and achievement of all students through greater federal control. NCLB focused on creating substantial responsibility for student achievement at a local level while establishing a national system of academic accountability, the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) measure. Relative to this study and the argument at hand, NCLB introduced alternative options for

students, such as charter schools and educational waivers, as an option to leave the schools who failed to meet AYP (Kirst, 2010). NCLB introduced competition between public schools and a private sector option by leveraging the American values of efficiency, accountability, and equity (Johnson, 2001). A new accountability system distributed responsibilities from the federal to the state and local levels. No additional funds were provided to support districts and schools through this transition, leaving this mandate the most wide-scale underfunded federal education mandate in American history (Björk, Kowalski, & Young, 2005).

Education reform efforts coincided with our nation's renewed social, economic, and political vitality (Björk & Gurley, 2005). National education reform efforts emerged to prepare the citizenry to compete globally, and education continues to play a role in the political platform for change. President Regan's National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk* (1983), deeming American schools as failing its citizenry by leaving its children unprepared for a future world. This report placed the onus on education by suggesting a strong correlation between student performance and the economy (Firestone, Fuhrman & Kirst, 1990). Varying interest groups increased their influence over local and state education matters, and communities showed considerable interest in local, state, and national education efforts. Waves of education reform followed (Blase & Björk, 2010), transitioning from organization efficiency and management (1983–1986) to student learning, teacher professionalizing, and decentralization of local districts (1985–1989) to social contexts of education (1989–2003). The fourth wave of reform is reflected in the provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) that called for greater control at the federal level and more

accountability of school leadership in student achievement. NCLB gave the federal government authority by creating rewards and punitive consequences to schools, districts, and states who met or failed to meet the national standards, a national assessment, and a national deadline for meeting achievement for all students (Finn & Hess, 2004). NCLB leveraged data gathered through assessment and accountability measures to provide vouchers to parents to choose their school of preference should their own child's school fail to meet an Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goal. The most recent reform efforts stem through the reenactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015) that provides state and local control over the standards to which each is held accountable. President Obama signed the ESSA bill into law, stating, "This bill upholds the core value that animated the original Elementary and Secondary Education Act signed by President Lyndon Johnson, the value that says education, the key to economic opportunity, is a civil right" (Kline, 2015). ESSA focuses on providing an educational opportunity for all students, specifically college and career preparedness; solidifies a need for national academic standards; secures annual student assessment for data-informed decision making; and sets expectations, accountability, and support for low-performing schools. Although AYP of the NCLB program no longer exists, state-controlled sanctions maintain district and school accountability efforts, and ESSA preserves NCLB's test-based educational structure focused on student-based outputs.

Education Reform in Kentucky

Kentucky led the nation in the most comprehensive education reform, the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA), which focused on curriculum, governance, and the financing of education (Browne-Ferrigno, 2009). The public's

interest in a higher quality of educational instruction and systems and its focus on instructional equity for all students drove changes in Kentucky's education system in the mid-1980s. A group of parents from around the Commonwealth dedicated efforts to the cause that every student in the state deserved the same opportunity for quality education despite the economic status of their residing county. These community activists created a coalition centered on the idea of the equitable distribution of resources to ensure equal funding for every Kentucky child (Stone, 2002). This coalition, the Council for Better Education, Inc., sued the President Pro Tem of the Kentucky Senate, John Rose, to "provide an efficient system of common schools throughout the state" (*Rose v. Council*, 1989). The lawsuit stated that Kentucky's education system was unconstitutional and failed to meet every student's educational needs. Upon judgment, both sides of the Kentucky legislature, education committees and leaders, parents, members of communities, business leaders, and former and current Governors worked on, drafted, and finalized a new education system. In 1990, KERA was legislated by the state government, signed by Governor Paul Patton, and enacted through the State Department of Education and local districts.

KERA's central premise stated that all students in the Commonwealth could learn at the highest levels (Foster, 1991). Enacting KERA initially created a positive effect on student outcomes and graduation rates, among other notable results such as the introduction of school-based decision-making, restructuring of the educational governing organization at the state level, and an equalizing of funding per pupil across the state (Hoyt, 1999). The state provided a uniform system of accountability and distribution of resources while granting more significant control over instruction, hiring, and policy to

the local schools. Many operational goals were reached, such as creating a better system for school finance, governance at both the state and local levels, and an increase in teacher knowledge and skills (Jones & Whiford, 1997). KERA's focus on other system aspects, such as equal per-pupil funding, an overhaul of curriculum, new accountability measures, better governance of schools, and better teacher-to-student ratios, created a positive effect on the school and district culture and instructional practices in the Commonwealth (Clements & Kannapel, 2010). KERA's regulations and requirements met many 20th-century operational, cultural, and instructional goals, but was slow to adapt to today's global demands.

KERA's innovative education reform efforts superseded the effects of federal mandates such as NCLB. NCLB (2002) provided an opportunity for control of the education system at a local level, although KERA offered local control to every school in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Further, the NCLB mandates required duplicate efforts and forced lesser standards on many Kentucky education leaders and professionals. As federal and state governments distributed education reform mandates that duplicated many efforts and activities required by Kentucky's education reform in 1990, some Kentucky districts and schools chose to implement change efforts beyond those required by state and federal governments to address a new vision of education in the 21st century (Browne-Ferrigno, 2009).

Context of the Study

Charter school advocates promote charter school options as solutions for innovation and higher achievement within the national education system. Minnesota (1991), the District of Columbia (1996), and Indiana (2001) adopted some of the first

charter school legislation to encourage innovation, equity for all students, freedom, and flexibility in operations, and accountability in instructional outcomes (Consoletti, 2012). By 2010, most states across the nation had adopted such charter policies, but Kentucky remained one of eight not allowing charter schools. Many Kentucky legislators considered KERA sufficient and equitable to charter ideas. KERA provides schools local control over curriculum, human resources, governance, and monetary resource allocation while protecting and funding schools through the jurisdiction of their local school districts. These legislators were searching for a way to provide the same freedoms - complete domain over teacher certification, student assessments, and district-wide reform efforts, typically granted to charter schools across the United States while preserving the intent of KERA (KERA, 1990).

Kentucky legislators began to promote the idea that, much like charter schools, Kentucky public school districts should have similar autonomy to implement district-wide reform to innovate beyond the rules of the Kentucky Department of Education. House Education Committee Chairman Carl Rollins introduced the Kentucky "Districts of Innovation" legislation in 2010 to address the rigidity of the state's education system requirements that restricted districts from meeting the physical, social, and instructional needs of their students. Kentucky's education system needed a platform for change and innovation for districts and schools that wanted to try non-traditional ways of instruction and education funding and flexibility for those who wanted a charter-like option for district-wide change. Although KERA provided funding to support equal access to quality education for all students, state regulations had not changed to meet the growing

demands of 21st-century teachers and students. Rollins recounted a conversation he had with a superintendent from Northern Kentucky:

> "This superintendent said he wanted to extend the school day and school year for homeless students in his district but didn't think the law would allow him to do it because a longer day and longer year for kids would mean a longer day and year for adults. 'We can't' must not be the reason that stands in the way of trying something that will reach more students." (Sells, 2012, "House Education Committee Chair", para. 3)

Rollins wanted to keep the integrity and spirit of KERA intact while providing a way for the state to allow for charter-like innovation in an un-chartered state. The result of such a program would allow Kentucky's education system to compete with other states across the nation by giving districts control of their education ideas under the direction of a regulated, state-provided, controlled process.

Leveraging the power of the national movement for change, a shared experience in education, and an understanding of a need for innovation, leaders combined political alliances and common interests to create a passage for House Bill 37 during the 2012 legislative session. The process to the bill's passage included support from former Kentucky Education Commissioner, Terry Holiday, who promoted the policy as a way to allow districts to break away the barriers of traditional instruction (Tomassini, 2012); Kentucky Department of Education's Director of Innovation, David Cook, who spoke to the policy as allowing Districts of Innovation (DOI) to have a more "charter-like" functionality (Lawrence, 2012); local-level district superintendents, school board members, district administrators, parents, and community members; state senators and house representatives, including sponsor of the bill and House Education Chair, Carl Rollins; the Local Superintendents Advisory Council, the Superintendents Advisory

Council, Kentucky's Innovation Network Lab District Partners, and other K20 organizations; and business and community leaders from across Kentucky.

Key state leaders supported House Bill 37, but politics ultimately guided the bill to passage. Senate Education Committee Chair Senator Ken Winters asked Rollins, Chair of the House Education Committee, for his support in passing an education bill that he was sponsoring. Unknown to directors within the Kentucky Department of Education, Winters promised the number of legislative votes needed to move the Districts of Innovation Bill in exchange for Rollins's promise to garner the votes for Winters's College and Career Education Technology Bill. HB37 would define "district of innovation" and related education-innovation terms and would give the Kentucky Board of Education the authority to support the conditions under which a school or district would apply and operate as an official District of Innovation. The State Board of Education could exempt districts from certain conditions, procedures, and administrative regulations to implement innovative practices. After passage in both House and Senate Education Committees, the bill went to the floor and in a surprise, last-hour vote by the House and Senate with provisions, passed 36-0, on March 30, 2012; on May 29, 2012, Governor Steve Beshear signed House Bill 37 into law (Richardson, 2012). The Districts of Innovation Act of 2012 reads:

> 701 KAR 5:140. Districts of Innovation NECESSITY FUNCTION AND CONFORMITY: KRS 156.160(1)(g) gives the Kentucky Board of Education the authority to promulgate administrative regulations and KRS 156-108 requires the Kentucky Board of Education to promulgate administrative regulations to prescribe the conditions and procedures to be used by a local board of education to be approved as a district of innovation by the Kentucky Board of Education. (Kentucky Districts of Innovation Act, 2012, para. 1)

The DOI program grants Kentucky's Department of Education the authority to issue districts waivers to reallocate resources and provide support for personalized learning and college and career readiness programming. Further, it supports non-traditional hiring and compensation practices, allows for new scheduling practices such as seat time and the number of days a district would be in session, and permits districts the freedom to collaborate with other districts on education cooperatives and provide instruction. These waivers provided approved on-site and virtual post-secondary instruction for K–12 students, creating global teaching and learning experiences for both student and teacher. Finally, the showcased districts could network to share best practices and leverage the state's granted waivers and provide support to other districts who wanted to implement innovative ideas.

DOI Application Process

The objective of the DOI program focuses primarily on moving students towards innovative, next-generation learning and college and career readiness (Kentucky District of Innovation Application, 2013), and the application process requires districts to demonstrate their commitment to this cause. Each district's application should include the district's mission and vision statements that demonstrate efforts toward reinventing or transforming current models of student learning, affording all students next-generation learning experiences. Districts should explain previous efforts of "continuous improvement and rewards risk-taking," while formally committing to future organizational changes, proposing how the innovation plan will enhance current and future district-wide reform efforts as well as overcome barriers to learning for all students. The application requires plans and statements of consent by key stakeholders at

all levels; demonstrate how the overall program affects the curriculum, governance, and human resource components of the schools through descriptions of the proposed innovative learning environments; plans for personalized learning, mastery of content, accountability measures, and expanded learning opportunities; provide ideas for pathways to graduation and alternative assessments; and design instructional roles beyond the traditional job classification of teacher or assistant. The application process also requires districts' plans and strategies to address expected outcomes for students at all grade levels and professional development for faculty and staff, describe how student and teacher plans would affect district innovation and district-wide reform, and should address the allocation of resources that will support the innovation plan.

DOI Monitoring and Evaluation

The district's self-monitoring and evaluation for DOI's district progress can be included in the application or replace the district's comprehensive plan (KAR 160.107). The strategies and plans submitted by district application annual data submission to the Kentucky Department of Education and Commissioner of Education, beginning at the end of the second year after DOI designation. The data must include information about students and teachers served under the plan, including at-risk students; students progressing towards graduation, college, and career readiness; certified and classified staff participating in the innovation plan; details about extended learning opportunities for students; and other measurable outcomes specific to the DOI plan as submitted in the application. The commissioner designates a district-level team who completes on-site district evaluations, retrieves qualitative data, and monitors progress for future research needs. The team then determines the district's DOI continued eligibility based on the

proposed plan and provides a recommendation from which the Kentucky Board of Education can return or remove the designation depending on progress or lack thereof.

In May 2013, a team from the Kentucky Department of Education, the Educational Professional Standards Board, and the Appalachia Regional Comprehensive Center reviewed applications from 17 of 173 Kentucky districts (Kentucky Department of Education, 2013). Four districts were selected as the first cohort of the DOI program (Tungate, 2013). David Cook, Director of Innovation for the Kentucky Department of Education, stated in an interview that these districts were selected because their applications reflected a comprehensive understanding of the program and its requirements, and their applications indicated this understanding (personal communication, October 10, 2017). Three of the four districts that applied for DOI designation in 2014 were selected (Innes, 2014). Cook explained that the superintendents and school boards of the second cohort of districts were aligned, passionate, and supportive of innovation and change within their districts. Although no districts applied in 2015, three districts formed the third cohort in 2016 because of their focus on personalized-, performance-, and project-based learning programs (McCarty, 2016). Of these ten districts selected for the DOI program, six can be considered rural according to the guidelines set by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (Nathanson, 1980).

The System of Education in the United States

The local school district is a sub-organization of the state's department of education, which is managed by a state board of education. The role of the state board of education is to advise state legislature and the governor, hire a chief state school officer,

develop policies, set standards for licensure and accreditation, and serve on advisory committees (Brunner et al., 2002). The state board of education sets education standards through which local district boards govern and local districts manage the instructional activities. Likewise, local school boards of education assume similar responsibilities to focus on school governance and policy, superintendent hiring, administration, academic performance monitoring, taxes, communication, projects, and independent oversight (Kowalski, 1993). As a chief state school official would work with their board, the local school superintendent works with their local board. Superintendent activities include managing the day-to-day operations of the district as well as working with the local school board on all district-related matters. In working with the board, superintendents spend much of their time communicating with them, thereby exhibiting two dominant roles in working with their boards of education, as a professional advisor (48%) and decision-maker (49.5%) (Brunner et al., 2002). Additionally, superintendents share policy-making and decision-making responsibilities with their board members, who ultimately represent their respective communities' interests (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000). Björk (1993) states that superintendents spend 80% of their time communicating with their board members to share information, discuss policy, understand key internal and external stakeholders, make decisions on behalf of their districts. These interactions superintendents have with their board members represent the constant micropolitical activity that must occur to effectively carry out their position's duties.

Researchers concur that school district superintendents and local school districts have a significant and direct impact on student achievement (Delagardelle, 2006). According to Kowalski (2006), there is no more important relationship that affects student learning

than the relationship between a superintendent and a board member. School district boards of education hire superintendents to lead, manage, and support these goals, which directly impacts district performance and student achievement (Waters and Marzano, 2006). Further, superintendents and school boards make decisions about resource allocation, such as time, money, and personnel. Therefore, these parties are largely responsible for supporting the district's mission and goals by directly supporting instructional goals and student achievement. Further, among effective districts, superintendents and boards of education assume direct responsibility for the allocation of finite resources through micropolitical activity.

The role of school boards. In the past, the school board led the direction, management, and instructional direction of a school district to ensure proper management and quality instruction. External and internal pressures can create different responsibilities for board members, but the main responsibility of state and local school boards is to set education policy that superintendents implement and ensure proper oversight to the management of the district. Local school boards hire superintendents, set budgets for their districts, and serve as a community liaison for the schools. (Hoyle, et al., 2005). School boards have the authority to approve or reject capital and instructional expenditures, which can affect overall instructional improvement. A superintendent must work with their school board members to build consensus to best serve their school districts. In district change contexts, scholars observe that local school boards tend to be well informed about the scope and directions of their initiative, the intent of the superintendent, and how it affects the wellbeing of the district. Communication between

the superintendent and school board members is key to the overall successful implementation of innovation in districts (Kowalski et al., 2011).

The shift in superintendent roles. External pressures, such as wars, industry, and community changes in economic, social, political, and technological occurrences, have affected education and changed the role of the superintendent (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014; Brunner, Grogan & Björk, 2002; Kowalski, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011; Malen, 1995; Thornton & Perreault, 2008). The role evolved, expectations compounded, and responsibilities of the superintendent became more complex (Björk et al., 2014; Mawhinney, 1999). These managers of systems of schools who were once master teachers and instructional leaders evolved into political figures, chief communicators, and social scientists who affected policy and funding of programs (Björk, 1993, 2008; Björk & Gurley, 2005; Glass, Björk & Brunner, 2000; Kowalski et al., 2011). Today's superintendents act as CEOs of school districts who advise their boards of education on all matters; lead local policy changes at a local, state, and federal levels; and advise district stakeholders on state matters and policy. Superintendents head public and intra-district communication efforts, academic programs, and represent their districts to local, regional, and state organizations (Kowalski, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2011).

The demand for superintendents having a complex skillset, including political skills, has increased over time (Hoyle et al., 2005). As these district leaders work with a variety of interest groups to support various education initiatives -- state, regional and local organizations, boards of education, local interest groups, community members, and parents (Björk et al., 2014), they influence state and local education policy, as well as

internal, organizational, and school board politics (Björk, 2008). Leadership characteristics such as rewards and coercion, allies and coalitions, reputation, and personal power (Bolman & Deal, 2013) are leveraged by superintendents to implement change within these highly political school systems. Community members increasingly demand to be more involved in the education system, and superintendents subsequently reformulate school system operations to include input from various individuals and interest groups (Ball, 1987; Blase & Blase, 2000; Kowalski, 2006). In turn, superintendents leverage the power of their communities to advocate for resources for their districts and support for their initiatives (Hoyle, Björk, Collier & Glass, 2005).

Education reform efforts require superintendents to develop leadership characteristics that garner political power and close power gaps to ensure successful reform implementation. As federal and state reform efforts put pressure on leaders in local school systems, superintendents play a necessary, active role in solving issues around the allocation of resources and changing education policy (Björk & Gurley, 2005). Since public agencies need to compete for scarce resources, superintendents who once acted as an executive manager now must act as a manager of conflict and negotiator of diverse interests as they lobby for resources to support their schools (Björk, 2008; Björk & Gurley, 2005; Goldhammer, 1977; Kowalski, 2006).

The Study of Leadership in a Changing World

Today's global economy has evolved from the confined boundaries of farms of the agricultural age, to the bricks and mortar of constructed buildings of the industrial age, to a boundary-free, technology-based economy of the 21st century. The new economy dissolved these defined boundaries by providing unprecedented access to

information, products, and services, which in turn is generating a new type of producer, consumer, and organization. Born in an age of near-immediate access to tailored products, services, and information, new generations of citizens have emerged: *Generation Y*, *Millennials*, and the *iGeneration* (Rosen, 2010; Schneider, 2015). Generation Y and Millennials fill today's workspaces. The iGeneration, born in 1994 through the present day, fills classroom environments built from traditional constructs and led by traditional leaders. Superintendents can approach their executive decision-making that ultimately affects iGeneration's learning and preparation as tomorrow's global citizen. Today's organizations require a different type of leader, one whose skills marry bureaucratic organizational processes and knowledge of the industrial age with the ability to understand and capitalize on information and human capital around the globe (Friedman, 2007). As classrooms adapt from traditional structures and systems to new ways of educating and preparing tomorrow's citizens, educational leaders need a diverse skill set to ensure this transition.

Industrial management. Understanding the history of organizational leadership and the evolution of industry provides useful context to understand leadership's role in guiding tomorrow's organizations. Organizational productivity became part of scientific study during the Industrial Revolution at the turn of the 20th century (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Rost, 1991). Taylor (1914), the author of the *Scientific Management Principles*, created a science of analyzing work and suggested that organizations can function effectively and efficiently through the management of its people and processes. Taylor believed in training workers, setting productivity goals, and implementing reward systems for meeting those goals. Shortly thereafter, Fayol (1916) crafted the first theory

of management, which focused on the improvement of production. He believed that specialization and divisions of labor, proper and complete management through authority-subordinate relationships, proper compensation, and adequate disciplinary actions have a positive effect on organizational production. Fayol promoted efficiency, rules, and regulations, and emphasized the processes and structures that controlled organizational information. Further, he believed that people should work in organizations as a personal mission of serving the organization rather than serving their own interests. Fayol posed that the more productive an organization could be, the more work, wealth, and, later, leisure a man would have. Weber (1922), author of the *Bureaucratic Theory*, stated that centralized labor forces were essential to the efficient operation of factories across the nation. Weber's bureaucratic theory explains that clear lines of authority and control, a top-down directional leadership model comprised of one leader and many followers, rational decision-making based on policy and facts, divisions of labor and specialization, and formal uniformity were essential to maximize productivity in the Industrial Age. Bureaucratic leadership is found in today's governmental organizations, and many of its principles, such as tenure and top-down management practices, are engrained in today's educational institutions.

Twenty-first-century leadership. In the late 20th century, Rost (1991) studied society's anticipated transition from an industrial, traditionally-organized age to a global, technologically-advanced age. Through exploring many concepts of management and leadership, Rost considered their function in organizations in the impending century. Traditional organizations that run efficiently through top-down bureaucratic management styles would no longer adequately serve a technologically-advanced workplace. Though

leadership studies were pervasive throughout the 20th century, none offered a precise definition of leadership, so Rost (1991) sought to develop a distinct definition of leadership for organizations. He challenged traditional definitions and studies of leadership in the industrial world by unpacking nearly 150 of 587 resources published from 1900 to 1990, which he claims never addressed the essence and core of leadership as a relationship among people. He asserted that the previous studies of leadership were ambiguous and lacked precision, and thus unable to supply standards to establish a *school of leadership,* especially in a post-industrial era.

Rost (1991) credits Burns's (1978) *Transactional Model of Leadership* when developing his idea of 21st-century leadership, which charges leaders to lead with moral imperative and purpose. Burns states that people's purposeful interaction with one another, in exchange for items of value, enables leaders and followers to work together towards higher levels of motivation and morality. Rost created his value-based idea of leadership as a credit to Burns's model, explaining that this influential, persuasive relationship leverages resources towards the progress of an agenda of meaningful and transformative change. In his definition of leadership, Rost requires that the leadership relationship between leader and member-followers be multidirectional and non-coercive, intended for real change, and developed through mutual purposes. Three items drive Rost's new school of leadership: 1) new types of people and missions would compose organizations of the new century, 2) internal and external forces would affect the organizations differently, and 3) new organizations would require new types of managers and leaders.

Management vs. Leadership. Bolman and Deal (2017) and Rost (1991) define management as leadership suitable for industrial workplaces in which an authority relationship exists that includes at least one manager and one subordinate. Managers coordinate activities to produce and sell goods or services. Leadership, however, is another style of management in which the head of an organization directs its body of workers in a less prescriptive and more influential manner. Leadership fosters real change and recognizes the pace and scope of what 21st-century organizations would require more than the structural, materialistic, achievement-oriented focused activities of the industrial era. Leaders build mutually-beneficial and active relationships between themselves and their followers by leveraging resources such as power, funding, and prestige. Leaders use these persuasive behaviors to benefit the organization, capitalize and benefit from this relationship, and allow anyone within the relationship to agree and disagree freely. Ultimately, although influence has the freedom to flow in any direction in the leader-follower relationship, influence most always flows stronger in favor of the leader.

Rost (1991) deems management as tactile transactional productivity and leadership as a transformational moral obligation, and twenty-first-century authors build upon his initial definitions of leadership work, providing additional insights into the differences between management and leadership (Bolman & Deal, 2013; Fullan, 2005; Kotter, 2012). Kotter defines management as a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly, which involves planning, budgeting, organizing, staffing, controlling, and problem-solving. Leadership, in turn, defines the vision for the future and inspires people to create organizations and

take action. Management produces a degree of predictability, whereas leadership produces change. Fullan (2005) advocates for leaders to build a sustainable culture of positive, meaningful change by building similar leaders and creating critical mass. He asserts that leaders should lead with moral imperative, understand and appreciate change, develop meaningful relationships with organizational members, design and build support systems to share knowledge, and create coherence within chaos.

Rost (1991) states that management and leadership are not mutually exclusive as the best leaders in today's organizations leverage the requirements of proper management and implement the characteristics of good leaders for the benefit of their organization. Leadership practices are beneficial for initiating change, while management practices are conducive to coordinating activities and reaching an organizational goal. Leaders who have the expertise to manage the details and functions of the organization garner the support and trust of their followers. Leaders who guide with moral conviction and clear communication bring members together to work towards a common goal. Education leaders who use both management skills and leadership qualities can instill the confidence in their organizations towards meaningful, long-term change.

Conceptual Framework

Defining innovation, exploring change leadership, and exploring innovation in business may help to identify possible patterns and characteristics of education leaders, their relationships, and decision-making within education change contexts. Exploring leadership traits and organizational change management processes allows leaders to understand the expectations of guiding tomorrow's ever-changing education organizations. External influences from a global society and internal pressures from

students of the 21st century force change upon a traditionally bureaucratic system and education leaders must lead their organizations through the transition to meet the demands of this democratic information-based set of stakeholders (Elmore, 2000). Innovation is defined in business and education literature as a new product, service, or idea introduced to change or improve (Howells, 2000; Rogers, 2003). Qualifying what innovation means, however – a new product, service, or idea, may vary from case to case, depending on the situation of change or improvement.

Innovative Leadership

Given the importance of building organizations that are conducive to fast-paced change in today's global society, it is essential to explore and understand the characteristics of the leaders who manage these innovative, change cultures. Organizations are comprised of people who lead and follow and are bound together by a common purpose, which may require an organizational transition or transformation over time. Change within organizations can be difficult for its members due to logistical, situational, and emotional challenges (Peus et al., 2009), and change that promotes new ideas, processes, or strategies requires a specific type of management. Rost (1991) proposed that although authoritative management is useful in certain situations, transformative organizations need a different type of management called leadership. Rost defines leadership as "an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real change that reflects their mutual purposes" (p. 103). Leaders who lead with moral purpose and mutual vision build upon the power of individuals and leverage the collective conviction towards meaningful change.

Scholars describe the traits of leaders that are useful to successfully design and manage change and build capacity among organizational members (see Table 1). Leaders within transformative organizations build capacity in others (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990); communicate a clear plan and shared vision to demonstrate purpose (Zaccaro, 2007); build robust systems of communication to provide multi-directional avenues of sharing of information; support structures that distribute resources; and demonstrate that change management in the organization is a priority. These support networks are important because the most significant change programs or interventions implemented within organizations are often met with overt and covert resistance by employees because of habit, fear of the unknown, absence of needed skills, or fear of losing power (Agócs, 1997). Leaders may leverage the information shared through these systems with organizational members' schema to induce further innovation and build a culture of change (Choo, 2006) that embodies transformation, reformation, risk-taking, experimentation, and innovation (Senge, 1990) and supports learning to benefit its individuals and the organization. Through the leveraging of the relationship with their followers, innovative leaders embody new ways of thinking and approaches to organizations. When partnered with knowledge, experience, and competence (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Bossink, 2007; Horth & Buchner, 2014), innovative leaders fully understand all functions of their organizations, including its hidden forces and unknown situations. Innovators gain the confidence of their members by providing tools to collaborate and collect meaningful data in real-time (Horth & Buchner, 2014), and use these data to reflect and then to plan for continued evolution and change. Restructuring organizations, processes, and systems are highly complex, and successful transformative

leaders understand the power of an influential relationship and the psychological dispositions of the organization's members (Leithwood, 1994). In essence, innovative leaders should understand the process of change, be prepared to lead change, and provide the necessary support for a change to be successful (Burpitt & Bigoness, 1997).

Table 2.1

Preliminary Characteristics of Innovative Leadership

Characteristic	Scholar	Description
Moral purpose and mutual vision	Ball, 1987	relationship-based, transformational not transactional
	Rost, 1991; Fullan, 2001	create a sense of moral purpose to ensure that individuals within the organization find purpose in their work
	Burke & Barron, 2014	a shared understanding of the nature of the work
Expertise	Bossink, 2007; Horth & Buchner, 2014	knowledge, experience, and competence
	Fullan, 2007; Kotter, 2012	capable of creating processes, systems, and measurements
	Shavinina, 2011	cognitive experience
Culture	Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990	build capacity in others, stimulate and reinforce cultural change, share power, communicate new norms and values
	Senge 1990, Leana, 2011; Horth & Buchner, 2014	experimentation and risk, multi-directional continuous communication, allocation of resources demonstrates the importance of learning, transformation, reformation, and innovation

Moral purpose and mutual vision. Leaders and followers who share common purposes, embrace mutually beneficial work and share common goals build organizations that are conducive to substantial, long-term transformation within organizations (Rost, 1991). Innovation and organizational transformation also occur in environments in which meaningful purpose drives people into action. Fullan (2001) suggests that significant organizational change occurs not in a holistic fashion by super leaders, but incrementally with great conviction by leaders who understand the organizational change process. Collectiveness is an essential element of change leadership that requires a shared understanding of the nature of the organization's purpose and mission (Fullan & Edwards, 2017). Transformational leaders recognize the importance of developing and leveraging relationships to implement change (Shavinina, 2011). Charismatic leaders generate energy, create shared commitment among their organizational membership, and direct individuals towards the new objectives and values. These change leaders have a sense of what their followers want, their beliefs and values, and use the power of collective ideas to induce change (Burke & Barron, 2014; Shavinina, 2011). Established change movements encourage organizational members to neglect organizational boundaries and create new systematic changes. Innovative leaders balance organizations between stable environments in which members feel supported and creative environments in which members can feel free to experiment (Bossink, 2007). Finally, innovative leaders recognize the importance of creating knowledge networks among organizational members to curate and share knowledge. Individuals that are empowered and committed to systematic change leverage share knowledge through systems that value the intellectual capital of individuals. Researchers state that change is a process, not an event,

and encourage leaders to communicate the entire purpose and functionality of the system so individuals can understand their role and know their contribution is meaningful (Holman, Devane, & Cady, 2007).

Expertise. Although transforming organizations requires a specific style of leadership, even the most effective leader cannot induce change without an understanding and the creation of a definite process for change (Fullan, 2007; Kotter, 2012). Innovative organizational leaders lead with distinct purpose by creating and communicating a mutually-acceptable vision, while recognizing that change processes are non-linear. Innovative leaders know that meaningful, sustainable organizational change occurs through a complex process of breaking down old methods to rebuild using new or innovative ways (Fullan, 2001). Therefore, leaders who lead through cognitive experience lead with a unique, comprehensive understanding of their immediate environment created through a unique interpretation of their surrounding reality (Shavinina, 2011). The leader's psychology, which includes managerial capabilities and experience, and expertise created by "external manifestations," are instrumental to the process of transformation (p. 169). Experienced innovative leaders understand the importance of setting goals, establishing new standards, defining roles and responsibilities for distributed leadership, and prepare for possible barriers to a successful transformation. They create systems, processes, and measurements for successes and corrective actions to redirect failing efforts. These leaders also serve as the organization's project planner and manage innovative departments to garner trust from following members through their expertise and communication skills (Eisenbach, Watson & Pillai, 1999).

In his eight-stage process for meaningful change leadership, Kotter (2012) states that leaders must establish a sense of urgency to leverage timing of the competitive market while simultaneously preventing non-supporters of the change-plan from building their case for status quo. Kotter recognizes that highly successful transformation efforts are not the result of either effective leadership or experienced management, but only a result of the combination of both. As change fluctuates and creates continued chaos, it breaks down norms and ensures a sense of urgency to reconstruct systems using a new framework. Finally, leaders who recognize their deficiencies become better by sharing responsibilities with those that fill their leadership voids, and this experienced leadership and managed environment create a competitive advantage over other organizations (Oyler & Pryor, 2009).

Culture. Although innovative leadership transforms organizations through a shared moral purpose and mission, and through respect and trust gained from managerial experience, an organization that wants to experience innovation and successful reform efforts must create a culture of innovation. Through the learning of new ideas, strategies, and processes, organizations strive to adapt to changing environments, improve functionality, and innovate (Eilersen & London, 2005). Change and innovation are essential for the vitality of organizations, and a culture of change brings about the certainty of continually doing this differently (Horth & Buchner, 2014). The power of change implementation is significantly affected by the culture and history of an organization (Ball, 1994), and the culture of an organization leverages the power of its people to create change (Fullan & Edwards, 2017). A central mechanism to reform and innovation is the political culture, which includes its interests, ideologies, decision-

making structures, and formal and informal power distributions (Blase & Blase, 2000). Innovative leaders encourage collaboration and communication across all sections of the organization as a means to encourage, document, and learn from risks and mistakes. Such institutional knowledge is treated as an essential asset to be created by individuals and shared throughout the organization and is essential to substantial and meaningful organizational transformation (Holman, Devane & Cady, 2007).

Organizational Learning

The power of knowledge is indispensable in today's global world, and an organization's commitment and recognition of the value of information and information sources are essential to its sustainable growth (Chapman, Soosay, & Kandampully, 2002). Organizations learn through collecting information from internal and external sources, reflect and process the information through a systematic process, and then methodically share the information among its members (Milway & Saxton, 2011). Innovative organizational organizations then use this information as part of an organizational learning and strategic planning process to question current practices and modes of thinking as a way to remain competitive and forward-thinking (Fiol & Lyles, 1985). Organizational leaders respect continuous learning and build systems of shared information among all members to encourage those within the organization to collaborate and share knowledge to learn from one another (Fullan, 2001).

As organizations change, the process of sharing information that leads to organizational learning takes different forms and functions under varying circumstances. The intentional degree of learning varies in result, from minute to transformative. These learning experiences improve functions, solve issues, or seek to understand and transform

the organization (Senge, 1990). One style of learning solves operational, routine, and repetitive problems, *Single loop learning* can create incremental improvements by focusing on quantitative knowledge, procedural learning, and how organization functions occur (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Leifer & Steinert, 2003). Another style, *double loop learning*, challenges organizational assumptions by asking why current organizational structures and policies exist (Argyris, 1977). Double loop learning changes beliefs and behaviors in the quest to solve complex problems. Finally, *triple loop learning* or *Learning III* is an organization learning "how one learns to learn" (Tosey, Visser, & Saunders, 2012). Members learn what inhibits organizational learning to produce new strategies to transform, understand, and strategically improve the organization.

Therein lies the difference that exists between organizational learning and a learning organization. Organizational learning is a process in which individuals can create, share, and retain knowledge for short- and long-term change (Argyris & Schon, 1978). A learning organization, however, is an entity that understands what drives change and values learning as a critical element of its culture and organizational success. Learning organizations are structured to support continued change, and allocate their resources in a manner that supports a methodical, purposeful, communicative atmosphere. This support includes and encourages the autonomy for members to experiment and discover new knowledge, encourage open collaboration, and inspire continued learning to create environments ripe for innovation and purposeful change.

Organizational history, schema, routines, and procedures are important to the learning and transition process, but equally as important to change and innovation is the practice of organizational unlearning (Tsang & Zahra, 2008). *Organizational unlearning*

is the intentional discarding of old knowledge to provide the opportunity for new ways of thinking (Tsang & Zhara, 2008). Unlearning can occur through the attrition of members of the organization; through the purposeful disposal of policies, procedures, and practices; and through the purposeful replacing of behavioral and cognitive routines. Learning organizations are served best by unlearning practices when both organizational and individual behaviors and practices are consciously and unconsciously modified to accommodate new practices and information. In essence, innovative organizations foster cultures that recognize and react to both internal and external pressures, influence, value and build internal sources of information, and recognize the need to seek outside expertise and counsel (Leonard-Barton, 1995). An organization's operating environment, whether supportive or not, can significantly contribute to leadership outcomes (Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004).

The processes and strategies for how an organization transitions from old to new ways of functioning require learning a new set of systems. A sustained culture of learning and change tightly integrates four essential components: people, knowledge, technology, and organization (Milway & Saxton, 2011). Leaders within learning organizations understand how to leverage each of these components to build an organization's viable future, and provide the motive, means, and opportunity for learning. They encourage experimentation and the discovering of new knowledge by appropriating time, people, and budget to support the environment. These leaders grow cultures of innovation to solve problems, creating clear communication channels to engage internal and external stakeholders, and building trust among all parties and enable purposeful change working

toward common goals, visions, and missions. They recognize that its people are innate, life-long learners who collaborate and communicate well with others.

Change Leadership and Innovation in Education

America's education system serves many purposes; it creates opportunities to prepare its citizenry for their future workplaces, establishes a better foundation for personal life, provides for the national welfare, and promotes national unity (Björk, 2008). This system, established over a century ago, is modeled from the rational, linear model of decision-making used in the 20th-century industry, and is insufficient in preparing students for the challenges of today's complex, fast-paced world (Horth & Buchner, 2014). Although our education system was sufficient in generation's past, Wagner and Dintersmith (2015) posit that possessing content knowledge is no longer enough. Today's knowledge-based world requires intelligent experimentation, interpersonal skills, and resilience to operate in highly complex environments (Edmonson, 2008). This changing world demands a different style of leader to lead organizations' continuous, fast-paced evolution of a growing technology-infused existence (Garvin, Edmonson, & Gino 2008; Wagner, 2010; Wagner & Dintersmith, 2015). To remain competitive in the global landscape and accommodate to opportunities that creative companies provide, Wagner and Dintersmith suggest our national education system adapt to the unprecedented speed, which ultimately requires a cultural foundation of change and transformation in our school systems. Fullan and Edward (2017) agree, stating that, as pressure mounts for stronger test results, national education reform efforts such as the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) are the wrong solution.

Today's public education requires leaders to be flexible and collaborate, create unique and interactive learning environments, and foster innovation by encouraging entrepreneurship in education (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004; Sanchez, 2014). Adapting learning environments to meet these changes, some education leaders move beyond the restrictions set by state and federal departments of education to create reform and encourage innovation within their schools and districts. These education innovators meet the perceived needs of their students and demands of their communities by creating environments that accept the risk associated with experimentation, garner the support necessary to implement change efforts, and instill a change-culture among its people (Fullan, 2007; 2001). The Commonwealth of Kentucky allowed its K-12 education districts to innovate beyond the regulations of its state board of education through the Kentucky Districts of Innovation program. This program focuses on providing provisions for districts that seek to provide educational opportunities beyond the requirements of the state's education system. This study focuses on these Districts of Innovation and the leaders who have created conducive environments for innovation and change.

Although research about innovative leadership in education at a building level exists, research about innovative leadership at the K–12 district level is nearly nonexistent. A conceptual framework is necessary to examine the concepts, variables, and characteristics associated with innovation and innovative leadership at a district-level. The researcher developed this framework through her own experience, existing theory and research, the exploratory research in this study, and thought experiments (Maxwell, 2013). The framework for innovation and innovative leadership in education will consist of two main components: innovation, the definition of innovation and the

definition of innovation in education; and innovative leadership, the definition of innovative leadership and the characteristics of innovative leaders: moral purpose, expertise, culture.

Rost (1991) expressed his frustration over the void of a precise and concise definition of *leadership.* Rost stated that scholars provided ambiguous, relative, and permissive definitions, and none were widely agreed upon and established as the standard used for research. The term *innovation*, much like the term leadership, has increased in usage since the mid-to-late 20th century. Similarly, no agreed-upon education-related definition is established or widely used in education research. Establishing a clear definition of innovation and innovative leadership in education is important to this study, which focuses on superintendents and board of education members who lead the Kentucky Districts of Innovation. In a general sense, innovation is the introduction of something new or a new idea, method, or device, or the process of innovating; as a verb, *innovate* means to make changes in something established, especially introducing new methods, ideas, or products. *Innovate* stems from the Latin word *innovat*, meaning *renewed or altered*, and from the verb *innovare* from "into" and *novare* or "make new" (Merriam-Webster, 2017; Oxford English Dictionary, 2017). Innovation associates with words such as *transformation*, defined as a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance, and *change*, defined "to make or become different."

The definitions of innovation within business, education literature, and other resources show similarities and differences. Definitions for innovation within business mainly focus on the newness of products, procedures, and services. Definitions differ among contexts; innovation within business focuses on projects and procedures, whereas

service innovation focuses on newly launched services or the rate of improvement attained. Innovation in business is an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new (Rogers, 2003), or new products or services (Howells, 2000). In services, innovation is expressed through the newness of and the improvement gained through the service to create value, drive market orientation, and increase overall performance (Slater & Narver, 1995). Businesses value innovation as a competitive market advantage (Chapman, Soosay, & Kadampully, 2002). Scholars agree that innovations may focus on organizational issues and processes that improve management practices, streamline organizational structures, customize services, enhance networking, improve distribution, advance procurement, and facilitate financing, all examples well suited for innovation in education (Cady, 2007). Yale University's Information Technology Services Office (n.d.), which provides business information technology services in an instructional environment, states that innovation provides value for organizations through the implementation of new ideas. Although education does not produce material goods and services, education is a service-based industry that produces and shares ideas and information. Therefore, qualities of innovation in business services may transfer well into this new framework.

Change, Leadership, and Micropolitics

The study of education evolved from the public's interest in the effectiveness of education related to the economy, the citizenry, and our nation (Eisner, 2017). Orr (2004) states that political science has aided our understanding of education by focusing on the distribution of power and resources—how both affect decision-making processes within schools and districts and how policy affects education at macro and micro levels. Politics,

the decision-making process of who gets what limited resources and how they are attained (Laswell, 1990), is pervasive in education contexts. The process of the allocation of goods and values in limited situations involves conflict, cooperation, power and influences, strategy, values, and ideologies (Wirt & Kirst, 2001). Political activity results from bargaining and compromise among individuals and coalitions (Pfeffer & Pfeffer, 1981; Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, 2015). The notion of politics is pervasive in education and is present on many levels within the system, both externally (macropolitics) and internally (micropolitics), because systems must choose which demands in their system to favor or reject. Blase and Björk (2010) posit that macropolitics and micropolitics, whose factors frequently interact, are conflictual and cooperative processes that involve multiple parties in the decision-making process (Blase, 1991, 2005). Political theory is what happens when "macro directions meet micro realities" (Mawhinney, 1999, p. 159), or what happens when local, state, and federal policy meets the reality of how things actually work (Flessa, 2009).

Politics is the distribution of who gets what, when, and how (Laswell, 1990), and resources such time, money, and personnel are scarce, power over the resources advances certain agendas, and in such circumstances, conflict of interests can occur (Hoyle, 1999). Bolman and Deal (2013) state that although most would see conflict as an issue or problem, conflict in politics can be considered as a model for collaboration, creativity, redistribution of power, and a conduit for change. Education reform has been passed down over federal and state levels, but superintendents and building-level leaders, with the support of their boards of education, are key to true education reform. Although macropolitics can be considered a large-scale distribution of power and resources from a

larger organization, micropolitical power in education is considered the actual school and district level power to transform and change the educational environment (Björk & Blase 2009). Additionally, in environments characterized by scarce resources, micropolitics is the central mechanism through which school reform is produced (Blase, 1991). Pertaining to this study, micropolitical relationships affect reform initiatives and occur at many levels within a district, initially between superintendents and their board members (Björk, Kowalski, Browne-Ferrigno, 2014), and can be leveraged to either accept or reject the reform or agenda (Boyd, 1991). Superintendents, as leaders of their respective districts, consider internal and external forces that affect reform efforts, build political support with key stakeholders such as board members to establish a professional climate that is essential to implementing reform and change.

Political organizations are comprised of individuals and coalitions who bargain and negotiate for limited resources with different values, beliefs, and perceptions of reality. This movement within an organization is unexpected and uncontrolled because of these personal and group agendas (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Although formal power structures exist within organizations, political structures also include informal power structures through which decision-making, communication, and coalition activities occur. These activities express themselves through political games and conventional notions of strong coordination and influential informal power (Mintzberg, 1989). Political power exists vertically and horizontally among the layers and departments of the organization. Individuals within these informal and formal structures leverage shared values to build a community of unlikely coalitions to achieve power over needed resources (Mawhinney, 1999).

Politics and organizational change. Political activity is "inevitable, advisable, and unavoidable" (Lindle, 1999), and does not allow for utmost consideration of the structural or formal rules and roles within an organization. Viewing organizations solely through the political lens leave leaders unprepared for the structural and cultural needs of an organization; however, the strength of the political frame is in realizing that politics is inevitable in every organization. Knowing what to expect in political situations and how to manage political agendas, coalitions, and expectations enable meaningful organizational change. Prepared for different types of power sources, leaders and managers can create plans for short and long-term plans, possible negotiations, and internal and external sources of conflict. Micropolitical, internal conflicts are leveraged as tactical power to retain or obtain real or symbolic resources (Ball, 1987; Lawler & Bacharach, 1983). For instance, group-level coalitions formed at the micro levels of organizations collectively have more power than individual action. Further, coalitions of unlikely partners can form to achieve power over needed resources. Although some consider politics and conflict as an organizational weakness, formal and informal coalitions can be powerful to create change, innovation, and creative problem-solving. A superintendent's ability to manage micropolitical activity within district level offices, among school board members, and among the community is an essential part of the superintendent role (Björk, 2005). Through a political lens, leaders recognize unspoken goals and agendas, accept the unexpected and irrational aspects of organizations, understand the location of power to achieve organizational goals and overcome resistance, encourage behavior, and achieve organizational goals that would otherwise not occur (Pfeffer, 1992).

Micropolitics in education. Whereas education macropolitics occurs within external environments and among influencers at the local, regional, state, and federal levels, education micropolitics results from activities from internal parties as they vie for resources, power, and control over values and ideologies (Blase & Blase, 2000; Wirt & Kirst, 1992). Micropolitical occurrences should be considered in conjunction with and resulting from macropolitical forces to fully understand the complete exchange of values, power, and resources (Mawhinney, 1999). Micropolitics involves the understanding of an organization's external pressures, influencers, and political environment, as well as the internal conflict involving individuals, political interest groups, power, and influence (Blase & Björk, 2010; Wirt & Kirst, 1992). Micropolitics addresses the "overt and covert" activities that individuals and interest groups use at any level within an organization to attain power and resources (Malen, 1995). Actors at all levels of education can interact in micropolitical activities: teachers, principals, building- and district-level leaders, and community members. Each actor plays a role in achieving their personal and interest-group goals. Berman and McLaughlin (1978) sought to learn more about the complex decision-making processes within public schools that implemented federally-sponsored educational innovations. They studied federal policy, resources, and implementation strategies as well as school climate, leadership and teachers, and district management and support. Key findings from their four-year study suggest that implementing sustainable educational innovations requires supportive district environments championed by effective leadership and resource distribution. Therefore, micropolitical activity is essential to achieving sustainable education reform results.

Micropolitics and superintendent-school board relationships. Communication, power struggles, collaboration, and elections can affect the direction of district policy, innovation, and instructional goals, and may have an impact on the working relationship of superintendents and school board members. Contentious relationships between the superintendents and board members, for instance, may cause sudden leadership changes, ultimately and directly affecting education reform efforts and student achievement. Hesitation exists among superintendents who strive for education reform while balancing board expectations. Glass's (2001) survey of superintendents for the Education Commission of the States indicates that 35.1% of all superintendents would be more aggressive in pursuing school reform efforts if given longer six-year contracts; however, at the time that the survey was administered, 64.2% of school boards reported that their districts hired three or more superintendents within the previous 10 years.

Rost (1991) references transformational progress as political, which accounts for the negotiation that occurs for the exchange between leader and follower. These negotiations can be found within the formal and informal activities previously mentioned. Understanding the political activities and relationships between superintendents and boards assists in understanding the failure and success of education reform efforts (Björk, 2008; Blase & Björk, 2010; Hoyle et al., 2005; Kowalski, 2006; Lindle, 1999). In national education reform efforts, micropolitics is considered the central mechanism for reform efforts, and successful efforts are results of fundamentally increasing accountability between state reform efforts and local implementation (Blase & Blase, 2000; Hoyle, 2010). Other key micropolitical activities in successful reform efforts include district-leadership interactions, their decisions, and the execution of instructional

plans for student achievement. School boards can have a significant impact on reform efforts at a local level. They can indirectly affect reform efforts through the hiring and firing of reform-focused superintendents (Fullan, 2007). School boards also represent the interests of their communities and make decisions on behalf of its students, directly affecting change agendas. When discussing education reform efforts in Kentucky and the role of the school board in supporting such efforts, David Cook, the Director of Innovation for the Kentucky Department of Education stated, "The school board aligns with the community, is concerned with community perceptions, and does what is right for the kids" (personal communication, October 10, 2017).

Micropolitics is instrumental in innovation and reform movements and may help to understand and explain the relationship between superintendents and district board members within change contexts. As a framework, micropolitical theory allows individuals to understand the power that resides in the superintendent-board member relationship and how that affects education reform at a local level. Eighty-three percent of superintendents state that micropolitics is one of the most significant challenges they face (Björk et al., 2014); however, they lead highly political organizations through which micropolitics forces inactivity or change and reform (Blase & Björk, 2010). The significant impact that the relationship between the two groups has on education is reason for superintendents to proactively work with each board member to positively affect district policy and functionality (Kowalski, 1993). To build positive relationships between both parties, Kowalski (2006) suggested creating and maintaining philosophical congruence to ensure a mutual understanding of values; he also pointed to effective planning to support a joint mission and vision and building positive, appropriate, and

mutually supportive relationships (Norton, Webb, Dlugosh & Sybouts, 1996). These normative dimensions of work are decidedly micropolitical in nature.

Summary

Education reform efforts require executive leadership that embraces new ideas, strategies, and processes to enhance the teaching and learning environments of K–12 school districts. Public education has traditionally held common processes, strategies, and ideals; however, in the changing pace of a global economy, citizens require different instructional environments from their communities' schools. Leading education reform in today's instructional environments requires a different style of leadership, as a conventional bureaucratic model of teaching and learning is no longer suitable in a world that has ubiquitous access to information (Elmore, 2000). Internal and external pressures on school districts have caused leaders to reevaluate their work, skills, knowledge, and environments (Kowalski, 2006).

Leadership within the traditional K–12 education system is found in the distributed leadership power of formal and informal leaders within networks: teachers serving as network leaders, building-level administrators serving as line leaders, and superintendents serving as executive leaders (Senge, 1990). The traditional model of disparate, non-collaborative classrooms, grade levels, and school buildings may no longer be viable for the education system or the students it serves. Innovation in business organizations can provide school districts with a model of how to change and transform its leadership practices, systems, people, and intellectual capital to meet the ever-changing demands of the global economy. In times of change, Heifetz and Linsky (2004) remind readers that today's leaders in public education are seeking to institute innovation

and change be collaborative rather than autonomous, create and call upon alliances, and garner support to move initiatives forward.

Although people, systems, leadership practices, and intellectual capital are important to the health of tomorrow's organizations, none may have more influence on its functionality than the organizational leader. Organizations whose members share a sense of moral purpose and shared vision create sustainable, meaningful change. Innovative organizations are best led by those who have experience and mastery of the functionality of the organization, and through this expertise, members find comfort and develop trust in knowing that the leader can guide the organization adeptly through change. Educational institutions are comprised of people, budgets, instructional goals, and expectations; educational leaders who want to drive change should understand how to navigate all systems to effectively guide their districts through meaningful, sustainable change. Finally, innovative leaders foster cultures of innovation by directing resources and building support systems to encourage information creation, aggregating, sharing, and collaboration. Education leaders in innovative contexts create cultures that encourage experimentation, collaboration, and new ways of thinking.

Superintendents leading school districts are similar to business leaders in the role of chief executive officers (CEO), running multi-million-dollar businesses. Both react to internal and external pressures, lead people within their organizations in a leader-member fashion, and answer to a board of directors who ultimately govern their organizations. Although both the CEO and Superintendent answer to boards, a CEO generally has more autonomy than superintendents have with their boards. When it comes to innovation within the organizations, superintendents find innovation occurs more easily after a

certain number of years of tenure (Glass & Björk, 2003) while CEOs are continuously required to innovate, since innovation is a crucial aspect of surviving in today's domestic and international markets. Although the status quo within a business is rarely encouraged or approved by a board of directors, boards of education may hire a superintendent specifically for the job of creating and implementing change, whereas others are explicitly hired to maintain the status quo (Gehring, 2003). Innovation and constant change are woven throughout the fabric of business organizations, while school districts have continued to survive in a highly political environment for over 150 years without drastic changes in macro-operations.

Innovation concepts passed down through state or national education reform efforts levels vary in their intent and definitions, sustainability, usefulness, and effectiveness of the programs. National efforts such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) created much uncertainty and arguably offered limited, sustainable instructional impact. State efforts such as the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) created a lasting impact on the operational goals of the districts; however, intended instructional outcomes garnered mixed reviews and results. In the effort to support and showcase innovation in Kentucky education, the Districts of Innovation (DOI) Program was legislated to create a waiver opportunity, establish a formal network, and highlight best-practices of innovative districts. The study of DOI districts creates an opportunity to study small numbers of rural school districts that were led by early-adopter, innovative leaders.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

The functions of innovative organizations require certain essential elements: a creative culture willing to risk failure in an attempt to learn, charismatic leaders who build capacity to scale innovative success, and leaders who lead deliberate change efforts with moral purpose (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Rost, 1991). Scholars have explored the impact that principals have on innovation at the building level (Orr, 2006); however, the relationship between superintendents and their boards of education as they make decisions to create and support innovative environments is limited. Blase and Björk (2010) call for further research to understand better the impact that district leadership relationships have on innovation and reform in educational organizations.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to understand superintendent-school board relations and decision-making processes in rural districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI). Two research questions guided this study:

1. Are there common characteristics among superintendents within rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)?
2. Are there similarities in the relationships between board members and their superintendents in rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)?

Research Design

Research is conducted to explore, describe, explain, and evaluate a subject to identify a problem or issue for which more information is needed (Maxwell, 2013). Research methodology and design should be chosen based on the nature of the actual research problem at hand (Wilson, 1986), a researcher's personal experiences, their audience, and the value of the research when considering the research method (Creswell, 2009). Flick (2006) provides essential components of research study design that guided the design of this exploratory study: study goals, theoretical framework, research questions, empirical material, methodological procedures, and consideration of available resources. The purpose of the exploratory study is to understand superintendent-school board relations and decision-making processes in rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as DOI. Designing a research study requires a specific process through which the researcher determines what she wants to learn and then crafts a well-positioned question or questions whose purpose is to explain what a researcher wants to understand. The newness of the area of study, the human activity and artifacts involved as data, and the flexibility allowed for data gathering among potential study subjects best situates qualitative research to answer the exploratory study's questions.

Case Study

Qualitative case study is considered an effective research strategy to examine the society or culture in a group, a program, or an organization (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Yazan (2015) states that case study is often used in education research and researchers' methodologies are often influenced by scholars such as Creswell, Merriam, Stake, and

Yin. Case study methodology is best suited to explore specific organizations, programs, or processes as bonded systems (Merriam, 1998) within the contexts of real-life situations (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Boundaries are set within case studies – time, person, organization, or policy, for instance, allowing for the research to explore a phenomenon within the "unit of analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 41). Yazan (2015) explains that Yin brings formalized structure to case study and advocates case study as a legitimate methodology. Although I appreciate Yin's call for ongoing measures of reliability and validity, his positivist orientation did not entirely influence my methodological perspective in this particular study. In knowing that what I concretely observed was not the entire meaning of each situation I experienced, I lean more toward a constructivist perspective. As an apprentice researcher having no commitment to one particular design (Yazan, 2015), I combined the most situationally appropriate perspective of each scholar to create the methodological approach for this study. The constructivist leanings of Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995) encouraged me to view the reality of each case and analyze each case through the reality of my own experience. Merriam (1998) encouraged me to research the study participants within their own world. Stake (1995) verified my role as researcher and interpreter of data, and stressed understanding the data through continuous analysis. Positivist Yin (2002) supported the answering "how" and "why" innovation occurred in these cases, ensured design quality through validity and reliability structures, and encouraged me to look for replicable patterns in the data.

Case study supports differentiation, encourages deeper understanding among studied subjects, and provides an opportunity to discover possible links among subjective meanings (Flick, 2006). Case studies also provide an in-depth understanding of the case

within the context of the issue, its significance, and its relation to the available literature (Creswell, 2013). Case study is effective in studying a particular individual, organization, or problem, and although common characteristics may acknowledge variability when the sample size is small, the cases may provide enough correlations to create significant findings (Stake, 1995). Further, Stake (2006) encourages a multi-case methodology that studies a set of cases with a common focus that may have commonalities or unique issues. Khan and VanWynsberge (2008) concur by encouraging cross-case analysis to assist in a greater understanding of these cases. They believe that cross-case analysis mobilizes and activates the knowledge of individual cases by comparing and contrasting the information of each case, and thus, producing new knowledge. Additionally, cross-case analysis can help discover and understand the cases' relationships, which helps to compare cases' differences and provide additional learning opportunities.

A unique case may be defined as an innovative program or an integrated system, and the bonded system studied. The DOI provides contexts of innovative situations led by superintendents and supported by their boards of education. This research examines the superintendent-school board relations and decision-making processes in three rural Kentucky school districts. Between the years 2013 to 2016, these districts were chosen to participate in a state-sponsored program that recognizes innovative changes of school districts designated to improve student outcomes. The Districts of Innovation program was created through state legislation to showcase innovative districts and increase opportunity for waiver application to create flexibility for school districts. These waivers would allow districts the ability to create new programs and allocate faculty and staff and

leverage district funding to support these innovations. The program awarded the DOI designation only, but awarded no additional state funding to support these change efforts.

Ten Kentucky districts were awarded the DOI designation, and 3 of these districts were carefully selected for this research. These 3 districts are all classified as rural but vary in geography, leadership, and operational factors (e.g., budgeting, enrollment numbers, numbers of faculty). In these circumstances, Yin (2009) suggests using a multiple case study approach for research that focuses on one issue. Multiple case study helps to show how single cases can illuminate occurrences of a broader phenomenon (Marshall & Rothman, 2011), no matter if the case operates as flawless, irrational, or malfunctioning (Stake, 1998). Cross-case analysis was used to situationally evaluate and discover similarities among the presented cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1981). Three within-case studies are presented in Chapter 4 from data I collected in interviews, self-documented pictures of central offices, District of Innovation applications, school district websites and budget documents, school district strategic plans (when available), newspaper articles, dissertations, and internet searches. After I became initially familiar with the data (Braun at al., 2018), I inputted interviews as my primary data source into the NVivo 12 computer software and began generating codes. Data collected through interview transcripts served as the primary source of data, while documents and photos provided orientation for research and interview question development, context, and triangulation. Approximately 90 codes were detected among the data, and four themes prominently emerged, including student preparation, rural identity, community, and communication. I identified several subthemes that added additional insight into how they were uniquely situated in each DOI. This research examined each site individually

and provides information on the commonalities and differences among superintendent and board member relationships and decision-making processes, in districts identified as being innovative.

Research Settings

The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 is known as an example of successful and comprehensive education reform (Foster, 1991), which focused on a redistribution of equitable funding for every child, incorporation of statewide education standards and accountability, teacher preparation and licensing, and governance at both state and local levels (Superville & Burnette, 2017). Almost one-quarter of a century later, the Kentucky Department of Education created a program through which districts could apply for waivers to allow for continued innovation. These Districts of Innovation would exist as a network of innovative lighthouse examples from which other districts could share ideas, leverage waivers to create their own innovation, and continue dialogue of sustainable new ideas in education. The DOIs are primarily represented as rural or town school districts and vary in geography all across the state (Table 3.1). Stake (1998) encourages qualitative researchers to gather data from the sites as part of their data interpretation, and therefore, I visited each of these diverse case sites directly.

Selection of Study Sites

Study of innovative leadership among America's schools primarily occurs in urban school-based settings, whose leaders, teachers, and students face different types of social, economic, and academic challenges than those of rural school districts (Abel & Sewell, 2001). Noting the difference between rural and urban school environments is key

Table 3.1

Kentucky Districts of Innovation (DOI)

District	Location	Type	Enrollment
District A*	Eastern	Rural	776
District B*	Southcentral	Rural	1,657
District C*	Western	Town, Remote	2,032
District D	Northwestern	Urban	99,812
District E	Central	Town, Distant	1,924
District F	Central	Town, Distant	2,607
District G	Central	Rural	818
District H	Western	Town	5,085
District I	Eastern	Town, Remote	3,138
District J	Northern	Suburban	20,716

*selected study site

to the overall premise of this study. The value of educating students, teaching as a profession, or leading change as a district administrator may carry different meanings or have different social implications among rural and urban districts. Although the term *rural* has been defined as something that is not *urban*, *rural* may also be associated with geographic terms that place the subject outside of an urban metropolitan statistical area (MSA) or a sociological term having specific values sometimes associated with an agricultural lifestyle (Nathanson, 1980). More fully, rural as a concept can imply a more significant social connection that emphasizes "personalized interaction, informality, simplicity, slow social change, and little social differentiation" (Atchley, 1975, p.2). The United States Department of Housing defines *rural* as any county with a population of up to 30,000 in non-metropolitan areas (Nathanson, 1980). The National Center for Education Statistics further clarified a city versus rural definition that was based solely on location within or from an urban-central locale (NCES, 2014). For example, approximately 8,000 or 56% of public schools are located in rural areas, which serve

approximately 21% of the U.S. student population or 10 million students (Harmon & Smith, 2012). In Kentucky, 123 of the 173 school districts are designated as town or rural districts (NCES, 2016). Selecting diverse rural district sites is key to understanding the challenges and decision-making processes of most Kentucky superintendents and their boards on operational and symbolic levels.

Stake (1995) suggests that researchers select sites whose subjects are easily accessible, who are open to inquiry, and whose inquiry assists in answering the research questions. He suggests that the selection of cases should also maximize what researchers can learn, considering the balance and variety of subjects is of utmost importance. Kentucky selected ten school districts as Districts of Innovation between 2013 and 2017 that demonstrated innovative practices such as promoting college and career readiness, increasing academic achievement, and providing non-traditional options for instruction (Appendix F). Determining the study's sites involved the review of the DOI applications that provided information about each district, its leaders, and innovation. Of the ten districts selected, three districts have superintendents who remained in their position since their DOI designation, whose board chair is still actively involved in their district, and whose enrollment numbers and rural location reflects typical characteristics of rural districts across the United States. Each of these three districts represents different locations within the commonwealth, which may provide an in-depth understanding of certain challenges each superintendent faces in each geographical area across the state. Further, each district's focus on innovation differs: a career magnet program, innovative physical spaces for its students, and virtual schooling. Differences among the selected districts ensured the researcher treat each case individually (Stake, 1995).

Description of Study Sites

Each of the study's three selected school districts offers primary and secondary education based on Kentucky education standards set by the Kentucky Department of Education. These districts applied for and were selected as Districts of Innovation. The following provides a brief description of each district's geographical, academic, and socioeconomic status as well as any additional details that may help situate each case.

Appalachian County Public Schools. Nestled in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains, Appalachian County Public Schools is seated among beautiful forests, mountains, and rivers of Kentucky. Through the trees and mountains live some of the most impoverished families in the United States. Although timber provides economic opportunity for some in lumber yards and the sawmill, the coal mines, gas and oil wells that once carried the county's economy no longer sustain the region. Per capita income for the county's 4500 residents is roughly $16,582, leaving 36.8% of its population living in poverty (United States Census, 2018), creating unique conditions for educating some of our nation's poorest children. Despite all of the barriers that its students face, Appalachian County Public Schools' mission focuses on preparing all students for the 21st-century world within an innovative learning environment. As the county's population has continued to decline, so have the district's enrollment numbers to less than 1000 students. The district is led by a superintendent who has garnered national recognition for the district's work in supporting an environment that physically, emotionally, and intellectually nourishes the whole child. Appalachian County Public Schools graduates roughly 96% of its student body, and 37% of those attend college,

vocation or technical training, or enter the military (Kentucky Department of Education, 2018).

Central County Public Schools. Central County Public Schools is located in the center of roads that connect the western and eastern sides of Kentucky, less than 120 miles from Kentucky's three largest cities. In a town with one stoplight, the county seat and its courthouse are located in the middle of a traditional town square. Churches and local diners are the heart of social life in the county, and the education community once comprised of small community schools, now migrates to the county's central elementary, middle, and large high school. The population of the county is roughly 10,000 residents whose per capita income is $18,449, leaving 23.4% of its population living in poverty. Central County Public School, serving approximately 1500 students, focuses on individualizing instructional experiences to meet the needs of every student while offering a wide variety of academic pathways that build upon relationships, academics, and future vocations. Central County Public Schools graduates roughly 94% of its student body, and half of those attend college, vocation or technical training, or enter the military.

Lake County Public Schools. Lake County Public Schools is geographically situated among some of Kentucky's most beautiful waterways, shares common borders of a military base and neighboring state, and serves nearly 2000 students in a western Kentucky county of roughly 14,400 people. Although the per capita income for the county is $26,224 and roughly 14% of its population lives in poverty (United States Census, 2018), and over half of its students live in or below the poverty line. The district's mission is to provide students with academic knowledge and applicable skills to succeed in life after high school. To support these goals, the superintendent has found

financial support to lead comprehensive district reform efforts that include changes in classroom structure and design, teacher preparation, and technology infusion while managing local school board of education directives. At the time of the DOI application process, Lake County Public Schools primarily focused on preparing its students for college, career, and the military while making provisions for solving an academic achievement gap. At present day, Lake County Public Schools has achieved a proficient rating from the Kentucky Department for the past four years, graduates 93.7% of its students, among whom well over half transition to college or the military.

Research Participants

The superintendents, board chairs, or board members of the selected school districts served as the research participants for these case studies. All superintendents were willing to participate in the research; two board chairs were willing participants, and one board chair was too busy to answer interview requests, therefore, a lont-standing and currently active member of the school board replaced him instead. Interviews from both parties provided multiple realities (Stake, 1995) to allow for different views of each case. Each superintendent has many roles, as discussed in Chapter 2, including CEO, communicator, politician, manager, and instructional leader. The board member serves as a representative of her or his respective community, is charged with the hiring of the superintendent, and ultimately supports the mission and vision of the superintendent when leading their district. Delagardelle (2006) finds that the relationship between the superintendent and board members has a direct correlation on positive student performance.

Superintendents. The superintendent of each rural DOI mentioned participated in an interview. The superintendent serves in the role of CEO for the districts (Kowalski, 2006) and is responsible for creating a vision and culture that supports district goals. As employees of district boards of education, superintendents act as master politicians, bargaining with internal and external stakeholders and managing diverse priorities of various interest groups to allocate resources properly to support organizational change (Blase & Björk, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2011). Consequently, examining their roles and how they are enacted through relations with school boards was pertinent to the study.

Board member. Board members' decisions directly affect the functioning of a school district (Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000), including budgeting, personnel changes, hiring and firing of superintendents (Waters & Marzano, 2006), and decisions ultimately related to student performance on standardized tests (Delegardelle, 2006). The relationship between board members and superintendents affects the allocation of resources, and therefore affect whether a district makes changes to improve or remain the same. Examining these relationships provides additional data about how innovation is supported and created within school districts. The board chair during the application process for all three DOIs is either still board chair, serves as an officer of the board, or is actively involved in campus activities. Two board chairs and one board member who are currently active and were active at the time of the application approval participated in an interview.

Data Sources

Data collection for case studies relies on historical documentation, in-depth interviews, and observation (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). These types of data are

especially helpful when separating a context from its phenomenon is impossible (Yin, 2008). Data were collected through individual on-site participant interviews, photographs taken of school board offices and board rooms, and document review that includes DOI applications and evaluations, district board minutes, district budgets, Fund 1 balance information, websites, local newspaper articles, and other media coverage. Interviews with superintendents and board members were conducted, recorded, transcribed, and stored electronically on a secure server. Supporting documents were retrieved early in and throughout the research process from district, state, and media websites. Timeliness worked to my benefit as the case study districts' DOI applications, once available online, are no longer found on the department of education website. The department of education revamped the program, posted a new application, and removed awarded districts' information and application information previously available and accessed from the website. All retrieved documents were printed, annotated, and stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's office.

Document Review

Analyzing historical documents supports the credibility of interview statements and the study (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Public records such as district board minutes, district and state websites, the United States National Center for Educational Statistics websites, other government documents, and information from educational organization websites provide actuarial information that provides information about each site that may be unknown to the researcher (Merriam, 1998). Further, DOI applications and Department of Education DOI evaluations provided information about the primary intention of each innovation, the results the innovations created, and the districts' plans

for continued and sustained change. Because school districts are publicly-funded entities, much of their activity is covered through local and state media outlets, and these published stories provided details about the innovations as seen through the lens of the community stakeholder. Documentation regarding the operational and visionary decision-making of superintendents and district school boards was found in the board of education meeting minutes. Analysis of these secondary sources of data, many of which can be found online, provided details to the creation and sustainability of each district's organizational change process. I retrieved budgetary documents, demographic data, DOI documents, and articles, reading and coding each document to sense themes that might emerge from the scheduled interviews and throughout the research process. These documents were used to provide orientation to question development, provide situational background to understand issues and context, and were used throughout data analysis for triangulation purposes.

Interviews

Interviews are a type of qualitative data collection that helps a researcher understand how participants observe their world and gather data about past events that cannot be recreated (Merriam, 1998). Interviews served as the primary data source for this study. I contacted the prospected research participants via email. Each participating district's superintendent and board member responded promptly and willingly agreed to participate in the on-site interview process. Six interviews were conducted between May 20, 2019, and June 21, 2019, and lasted approximately one hour each. The semi-structured protocol provided structure through guiding questions (Merriam, 2009) as well as the open-ended dialogue needed in exploratory research (Nardi, 2006; Flick, 2006).

Questions were created to explore the personal characteristics of the district leaders and the relationships that these decision-makers have to create change. These semi-structured interviews included scripted and non-scripted question sets crafted for each research participant based on their district role (Appendix C and D). All six interviews were audio-recorded, and files saved to a secure server.

Data Analysis

The process of qualitative research is established not as a linear, predictable process, but rather as a "sequence of decisions" (Flick, 2006, p. 136). The process begins with the research goal in mind, although a series of decisions based upon data collection and analysis can change the course of the research. Qualitative study incorporates and values the experience of both researcher and researched subject through simultaneous data collection and analysis (Maxwell, 2013). In the case of this research, Stake (1995) emphasizes the importance of continuing to gather and analyze data while gathering new data to accurately interpret the "earliest of observations" (p. 49). The process should continue by creating memos, notes, and transcriptions of interviews, then immediately coding the data to organize, identify, retrieve, and interpret information with relative ease (Merriam, 1998).

The iterative research analysis process began with the choice of the cases themselves, selected through three criteria: (1) Each case was chosen through specific program with defined criteria and designated *innovative*; (2) superintendents of each case were employed as superintendent of the school district at both the time of the DOI designation and the time of the interview data collection; and (3) the district is considered *rural* according to guidelines set as previously stated. Throughout the winter and spring

of 2019, I continued the within-case analysis process (Yin, 1981) by reading and re-reading the District of Innovation applications, researching each case on the internet for information found on education organization, government websites, and other sources, and noting and journaling concepts of all. Analysis of these secondary sources of data, many found online, provided details to the creation and sustainability of each district's organizational change process. I retrieved budgetary documents, demographic data, DOI documents, and articles to understand the full context of the innovative district before conducting the interviews. I read each document, while taking notes throughout the process to identify themes that may emerge from the scheduled interviews and throughout the research process.

Preceding each interview, I took pictures of the board offices and board rooms, which served as a visual record of the place of interview and formal setting of the workplace for both superintendent and board member. In addition to the many documents, websites, and other information that I continued to analyze, I found value within the interview transcripts of each face-to-face interview. After transcribing each within 48 hours of taping, I edited participants' off-the-record language and hand-coded each transcription to note initial concepts and grouped them into themes. After each interview, I reread documents and reviewed photographs that pertained to each case as a way to compare transcripts with my notes, sense any patterns that might emerge, as well as triangulate interview data with other pertinent documents. I continued to analyze documents and gathered resources throughout the coding process, although I relied mainly on interview data. I focused solely on studying the characteristics of superintendents and the relationships they had with their board members and found that

interview and other data provided the most promising avenue for developing a descriptive narrative, analysis, and triangulation.

I collected study participant interview data (May 2019 through June 2019), transcribed audio files and listened to them multiple times, and journaled initial thoughts and themes captured within the interviews. I incorporated electronic qualitative software NVivo12 into the research process to further analyze the interviews numerous times over the course of months. My initial experience with NVivo12 was confusing as is the initial use of any software with a technical user interface. I found NVivo's YouTube videos useful in learning the functionality and features of the software. I soon realized that the coding software provided the capability to highlight and organize data and create visual tools to produce visual cues and insights, supporting categories unveiled throughout the research process. NVivo12's allowed me to visualize significant themes that emerged in the interview data. Coding the interviews line by line, I had the capability to code the same sentence and approach the same statement in different ways. This allowed me to visually see patterns and verify my initial and continuing thoughts throughout the research process. I debated whether to upload into NVivo12 the document data along with the interviews but decided that the main focus of the study remained in the data gathered in the interviews. Consequently, documents would serve as a secondary data source to be used for setting context and fact checking.

The NVivo12 software delivered an effective approach to conduct within-case analysis for each case and cross-case analysis across cases (Merriam, 1998). I was able to explore, validate, and test associations among concepts that presented themselves in the research process through the tools available in the software (Yin, 2009). I detected 90

codes across the cases, which I then emerged into four prominent themes: student preparation, rural identity, community, and communication. While within-case analysis was used to discover themes, cross-case analysis was used in this exploratory research to uncover similarities and differences among the cases and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Quality Assurances

As the primary instrument of this research, it is my responsibility to assure quality within the research, including consideration of all procedural steps leading to the gathering of data and its interpretation (Flick, 2006). I recognize that as the observer and research tool, I am the primary source for internal validity and should ensure a critical presence throughout the research process (Merriam, 1998). Serving as the primary analytical instrument, I recognized and mitigated any potential personal bias, noting my personal reactions in the margins of the interview transcript documents. To question my own internal validity (Flick, 2006), I used numerous triangulation methods, including cross-checking my findings with knowledgeable colleagues and involving the research participants in *member check*, which is the consideration given to the research participants to ensure data and interpretation accuracy. Flick (2006) conveys that the research process should be transparent to the reader, including the development of the research questions, the selection of the research participants and case study sites, and how the data was gathered and analyzed. To ensure quality, Denzin (2009) suggests data triangulation through which the researcher studies the same phenomenon through multiple data sources. I relied on numerous data sources, as previously discussed in this chapter.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research is best used in inquiry-based, exploratory studies in which the researcher has experience within the field of study or the researcher wants to build a new theory (Flick, 2006). Experience is important for certain aspects of study, but a researcher's thinking alone provides unscientific and inconsistent statements that are limited in scope. Qualitative researchers gather data in non-manipulative situations, leveraging their own experience when considering the contexts, settings, and artifacts of their research. Qualitative researchers must also understand what experience they bring to the study and craft research questions to find answers to specific issues within the study (Creswell, 2013). As an advocate for naturalistic study, Eisner (2017) states that study participants be "observed, interviewed, recorded, described, interpreted and appraised as they are" (p. 33) and suggests that research processes for new fields of study should include considerations of available literature and what knowledge is missing. Data should be gathered and analyzed through experiences of individuals or groups, among the artifacts and communications, and within the participants' natural settings (Flick, 2006; Maxwell, 2013; Nardi, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) allowing for conclusions based on empirical data and the use of systemic methods of analysis. Therefore, a researcher should incorporate objective and replicable procedures when creating a study within an unexplored area of research (Nardi, 2006).

Although research can benefit from basic knowledge about the field, one's philosophies can influence what and how study participants and cases are researched and exposed. My experience working with superintendents in innovative change contexts drives my interest in this field of this study, and my experience within P12 education and

among P12 district-level leaders influences the study's philosophical lens. Further, my understanding of the micropolitical relationship between superintendents and their board members informed the structure and design of the study. The data analysis and reporting have transpired through the lens of my experience. Because I participated in innovative change contexts in many of the DOIs in Kentucky, I selected only those districts where I did not work with the superintendent to craft the innovation. By selecting these districts, I understand the process of organizational change but not the detailed, personal interaction with the selected districts' change process. I perceived this as an advantage in this unexplored area of study, having firsthand experience in P12 organizational change, yet studying unexplored case subjects.

Summary

This study of Kentucky Districts of Innovation intends to explore the relationships between superintendents and their boards of education, decision-making processes in innovative contexts. Research confirms that leadership in organizations significantly affects change contexts (Senge, 1990), and states that the process of innovation in education occurs within specific cultures led and supported by leaders with innovative insights, charismatic communication, and organizational leadership experience (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Bossink, 2007; Horth & Buchner, 2014). These themes may assist future researchers' or education leaders' understanding of the important aspects of relationships between the district or organizational leaders and members of their boards of education.

This exploratory study focuses on three of ten districts designated as Kentucky Districts of Innovation. Qualitative research is best situated to generalize some aspects of an area of study for the purpose of future research or practice (Maxwell, 2013). The study

of district-level education leadership within change contexts is a relatively unexplored field of study, and this exploratory multiple-case study approach uncovers emerging themes about innovative decision-making processes and relationships of key district leaders (Eisner, 2017). Chapter 4 presents these findings and themes. Chapter 5 discusses my conclusions and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This exploratory, multi-case study sought to understand the characteristics and decision-making processes of rural school district superintendents as well as their relationships with their respective school boards engaged in launching and sustaining education innovation. The study included three school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI) located in several regions of Commonwealth. Districts included in the study were selected based upon current and active statuses of the superintendent and board members within a time frame beginning with dates included in their respective applications for being designated a DOI until the time of the research participants' interviews in June 2019. Pseudonyms for these districts were Appalachian, Central and Lakes. Two questions guided this study, including:

1. Are there common characteristics among superintendents within rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation?
2. Are there similarities in the relationships between board members and their superintendents in rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)?

Four themes emerged from data including (a) student preparation, (b) rural identity, (c) culture of innovation, and (d) communication. Some of the themes are more complex than others; consequently, their meaning and function may differ within each district, requiring themes to divide several into sub-thematic categories.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with district superintendents and school board chairs intended to elicit participants' perceptions about student preparedness for future schooling and careers, support for innovation in education, and the process of change in education. I collected a wide array of documents throughout the study, including districts' DOI applications, financial status, and demographic information to better understand district decision making contexts and processes. I used an inductive approached to analyze the interview transcripts, documents, and other artifacts using the NVivo software, which allowed to me conduct within-case analyses to organize, code, identify patterns, and identify themes. I prepared a descriptive narrative for each school district (Appalachian, Central, and Lake). Each descriptive narrative includes information about the community, the district, and the focus of each DOI application. During the study, I recognized the importance of providing context for each rural school district to contribute to understanding as well as the findings. By providing poverty rates, community employment rates, student college and career transition rates, and test scores, the study reveals the importance of each district's work. Employment, poverty, and student preparation information highlights obstacles that students in rural areas overcome, district test performance, and how each meets or exceeds state expectations for college and career readiness (NCES, 2016; KDE, 2018).

The four themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are used to organize and report data. At the conclusion of each case, I present themes that emerged. In a concluding section, I present a cross-case analysis that reports common themes that emerged that address the study's research questions.

Appalachian County Public Schools

Appalachian County Public Schools has been recognized by regional, state, and national organizations for its innovative work in education. Home to the nation's longest-serving mayor (elected in 1959), the county is steeped in cultural pride dating back to its first settlers of 1780. The geography of the county and limited transportation routes produce inherent isolation from major cities, and poverty is pervasive in the county. With an unemployment rate of 27%, 37.7% of households whose children attended school between 2012-2016 had an annual income of $19,344.00 and live below the national poverty line. Although timber and some surface coal mines provide sources of income, the school district is the county's largest employer. Despite unparalleled levels of poverty (91% free and reduced-price lunch rates), the district is known for its reputation as early adopters to new instructional programs and systems.

As an advocate of technology-infused education, Appalachian County Public Schools creates new paths to learning despite these geographic and economic boundaries. The district has received several awards including 2018 Best High School (Bronze) by the *U.S. News and World Report*, and is a member of prestigious organizations including Digital Promise's League of Innovative Schools, both of which are evidenced in pictures I took before the superintendent's interview. The district's only high school performs at 67.5% proficiency in combined reading and mathematics (compared to the state's 73.1% average) but exceeds the state average in college and career transition rates of 67.3% (to the state average, 65.6%). Data suggest that although district-level leaders are aware of the challenges they face regarding student performance, they are proud of their students' graduation transition and preparedness rates.

Appalachian County Public Schools' District of Innovation application was submitted in 2013 and requested waivers to remove multiple barriers to student learning. The application requested waivers to create relevant learning outcomes for their students through personal education plans (PEPs), waivers from seat-time requirements to allow for virtual learning, and waivers to restructure graduation requirements. The overarching goal was to meet the students' needs and prepare them to meet challenges after graduation. The district's approach to student-centered learning was quite innovative for its time and influenced student-centered learning in other Kentucky districts.

Theme 1: Student Preparation

Preparing students for life is a resounding theme in all data collected for Appalachian County Public Schools. Interview data, district website, newspaper articles, DOI applications, and the district's strategic plan indicate a pervasive effort to center all district activities on ensuring student success. The newly released strategic plan was co-created in 2019 with community members and leaders from economic development, civic engagement, education, housing, and drug abuse and addiction areas. The plan includes the district's vision, which calls for graduates who are prepared for the workforce and engaged citizens. The plan, created by these community members, is available on the district's website and includes strategies and tactics to engage young people to build a better quality of life. Further, the plan states the county schools' vision for graduates, which calls for an innovative learning environment that prepares all students for their future and breaks down barriers to student learning. Preparation strategies included in its instructional program are listed in the strategic plan and include adopting a growth

mindset into education, focusing on life skills, and incorporating competencies such as resilience and responsible citizenship.

Competing in the 21st century.

When superintendent Dr. Jack Smith was asked to describe the culture of the district and how it had changed since he took the job nearly a decade ago, he talked about students in his district and how life for them had changed since mobile technologies infused the learning space. "But it's like everything else if we want our kids to use the devices and prepare them for the 21st century world their world is a 24/7 world. And we had to shift the mindset that education is different than an eight to three [8 AM-3 PM] world." Smith continued to say that parents and community have come to accept the flexibility that comes with a technology-infused learning environment. The change for him was also personal. He described his experience leaving his community as a young college student and feeling a lack the skills to succeed saying, "that they had the skills necessary that I didn't have when I left here because I graduated from the same high school.". He wanted to be sure that ACPS students were prepared saying, "I wanted to make sure that they were in their element and [that in] their world, that they were ready."

College and career readiness transition.

The DOI waiver provided greater flexibility for the district in meeting the Kentucky high school graduation requirements. The district sought to remove mandated course schedules in exchange for personalized education plans that met students' individual college and career readiness needs. Further, the district asked for flexibility for graduation time limits, lifting the four-year requirement to either achieve a high school diploma and begin college or vocational school. The waiver has produced promising

results. When comparing the district's performance with the state's transition readiness rate, the superintendent stated, "We're going to be almost at 90% this year. For that to speak volumes of a work-ready community that's already here, but those kids deemed to be ready by the state, there won't be a lot of squawking [from the community] about [test scores]."

Board member Jenny White has seen innovative practices throughout her 65 years in the district as an educator, leader, and now board member. She believes that the district's vocational partnership with two area school districts has also proven successful for many students who are exploring careers in welding, auto mechanics, and nursing. She is also proud of ACPS's dual-credit program which had led to the success of many first-generational college students from Appalachian County. White described the culture of her county and the history of those not having experience in higher education. She said, "And if you get them started in high school, they're more likely to finish, to go on… because our parents are backward about college because they didn't go." She was proud of the students in her district who took the initiative to enroll in the dual-credit program and what it means for their future. She observed, "Once they get in there [dual-credit program] and find out how to do it, they do it on computers from home. That's a great thing! But if you get them started…we're having more and more [students] in college."

Valuing education.

The district graduates over 90% of its students, and over 80% are deemed *transition ready* by the Kentucky Department of Education standards. Although the district's testing performance places ACPS at the bottom half of the state, the superintendent spoke to the transition rates versus the academic performance rankings

seen on state tests. The superintendent and the board chair agree on what constitutes as success for their students saying, “Ms. White and I are on the same page – that we understand the importance of academic performance, but we also understand that's just one measure of just now successful a child can be.”

When asked about the change that she’s seen since the Jack Smith took the position as superintendent over a decade ago, she opined about the meaning of education as being much more in her rural community than a test score saying, “There were families who didn't used to go to school. They dropped out of school, and I've seen that change. Those people are going to school now. They're working now.” She continued by discussing what the value of education means for her community stating, “Education [is] the only thing that can change that [poverty] cycle.” Over the years, Jenny White has seen how education change transform a community and how it affects individuals in this impoverished community. She said, “I've seen it change here because we have people who are teachers' aides now. Generations back none of their people went to school. And their children are going to college now. [Education’s] the key to all of it.”

Theme 2: Rural Identity

Perspectives on life in a rural county seem similar across those interviewed in the school district and community. For example, Board Chair Jenny White shared her reality of the rural county she's lived in for most of her life. The reduction in jobs causes children to move out of the district, which impacts the financial operations of the district. The lack of economic opportunity has caused ACPS to lose a significant number of students for a district its size; however, student attrition occurred for different reasons just decades ago saying, “Back then students dropped out of school, that’s how things have

changed. A lot of people have moved out of here. They don't have as many children." The economy is different than it once was, particularly with regard to how families operate. Once an agricultural county, farming required children's assistance to maintain farms and produce income for the family. According to Jenny White, "This district used to be farming, we had a lot of tobacco farming, we had tobacco and cattle. Everybody was self-sufficient, and now we don't have that."

Superintendent Smith recognized changes in economic opportunities in Appalachian County and changed his district's programs and systems to meet the needs of its students. Although these transformations have earned Appalachian County Public Schools local and national acclaim, Dr. Jack Smith is not motivated by recognition but rather by positive student transition into employment and academic opportunities. For example, Smith talked about the new Tech Hub organization that employs nearly 200 people, the successes that his students are creating for themselves, and his motivation for pushing for change. "That [the Tech Hub] is big for our little community. That keeps money at home. People can work from their homes. And it is really big for us and this small community. And again, these kids are working there … came through ten years ago, who's got some of those skills. That's what makes me feel good."

Significant transformation does not occur freely or easily, especially in rural districts. Change efforts can result in faculty and staff resisting due to an increase in workload, uncertainty, and need to maintain power. Community expectations and resistance can also make change efforts difficult for reasons that Superintendent Smith stated, "When you live in an environment that doesn't put a lot of emphasis on education, which it doesn't here. Our education attainment levels validate that." The superintendent

also experienced pushback for requested change at a state level. He spoke about being denied DOI status when the first district applied. The application requested a wavier for a program named Non-Traditional Instruction Days, which would allow for continued student learning during the winter. When the state Department of Education denied the district's application, Smith said he called them because, "I had to be very – because we couldn't in their mind in Frankfort… they didn't understand the rural piece and the rural aspect of trying to do something this unique." The application was resubmitted the next year and accepted.

Community.

Understanding the importance that community plays in rural life is essential to understanding rural education. Often a county's largest employer, rural school districts aggregate diverse groups of stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty, staff, parents, taxpayers). It is evident that the superintendent plays a vital role in the community, often setting an agenda that includes preparing employees for future employers, setting the tone for the importance of education in the community, and shaping community expectations for future economic development. Board member Jenny White discussed recruiting of Dr. Smith to return and serve in the district in which he lived. She spoke about the value of knowing him and his family and how that contributed to her convincing him to accept the position. "We had to work at it, but we got him. Well, his family is here. His dad was a minister here. His brother was an anchor here. And they [the family] were always real supportive [of education]."

Rural school district leaders may also face culturally-driven expectations that affect family dynamics and the local economy. Superintendent Smith spoke to the

challenge of educating, graduating, and furthering students in rural areas when their families pushback. He described the pressures put on students by families who are uninterested in education, stating that families will say to their students, “Don’t get too big for your britches. Don’t get too smart on us because if you do that, you won't come back and be our caregiver.” Although he can change the culture within the district, there are certain aspects of the district culture he cannot change including familial expectations tracing back generations. ”We see that a lot in our group of kids and the relationships between the grandparents raising the grandkids. ‘Somebody's gotta take care of me.' That's what they're counting on, and that's a bigger challenge.”

Further, Superintendent Smith talked about influencing the community expectations for economic development and preparing students for a new future. His community's citizens live in an isolated area and may never have left the area, and there are others who are comfortable within a traditional non-technical world. He shared his experiences, discussing future opportunities available in the new tech economy versus upgrading the roads that connect it to larger cities saying, "So sometimes it's a different mindset because some people are kinda ingrained in that ‘roads are going to be the savior of all these small rural communities' and it's not. I mean, you go to the [area counties] … you've got the roads running right through there, and it hasn't helped them. Why is it going to help us?"

Geography.

The physical geography and location of the district pose unique challenges to the citizens. The two nearest metropolitan statistical areas are approximately two hours away in different directions. Although beautiful and unique, travel through the terrain can

create hazardous or lengthy, indirect routes. These unique challenges can prohibit companies from locating nearby or investing in a smaller population. Technology has broken down physical barriers and allows ACPS students to have more opportunities for learning and transitioning into college and careers. When asked about how technology and innovation have changed her county, Jenny White reminisced about the land and community schools of the past and how technology has changed the landscape of the community:

> We crossed the river in a boat to get to the school where I went. Now we have a low water bridge now, and you can go up there. But that school is gone, been long gone. But there's houses up on that mountain where we picked berries and went to get the cows. And you can go up there and get, you can see things all over the world on the internet up there. So that's innovation.

Ms. White recognizes how far the district has progressed, even though it faces geographical challenges. She referenced these challenges and those of similar districts, and discussed how area counties work together to provide opportunities for their students. "We don't have a vocational school. We send ours [students] to [an area] county and [another area] county comes down there." ACPS continued changing its systems and instruction to meet students' needs. Several national education organizations have recognized the district's efforts. Through these organizational programs, district leaders traveled and networked with their counterparts in other districts across the United States to learn more about innovation in education. Jenny White was surprised by ACPS's progress in comparison to larger districts with more resources. The district participated in national programs that partnered ACPS with schools in Arizona, and Baltimore, Maryland. She stated, “They're not that much different anywhere. In fact, I saw some that

aren't nearly as good as we have here. I was surprised because I thought we would be far behind them, and we weren't."

Revenue.

The Kentucky Department of Education funds public school districts through a formula-driven allocation of resources named the *Support Education Excellence in Kentucky* or the SEEK formula. SEEK was a result of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) and established a formula to guarantee equal funding for students across the state. Districts rely on SEEK formula to fund most of the district activities, but when a county population decreases, so does the funding source. Superintendent Smith discussed the challenge of losing 100 of 675 students in ten years saying, "We have had a tremendous loss of revenue. I mean tremendous. [. . .] So imagine what a loss of one hundred kids does over ten years. It's detrimental."

Superintendents in many rural towns have to make sacrifices and fulfill district duties accordingly. In speaking to the adjustment of the loss of revenue to survive, Superintendent Smith said,

> I just have to play that game. So I'm also superintendent, but I also do all the title programs. So again, it's showing you the differences in rural district superintendents versus other districts that pretty much shared the superintendent. And you're over ALL, but I'm the one who has to really sit down and do the work. […] If you're not from here, you'll say 'How do you do it?' It's just you carve out the time to do it. You have no choice because of financial implications.

Innovating in such conditions is even more challenging in rural areas, because it requires creativity and personal drive from its leaders. Funding innovation in rural districts emerged as an important theme that will be subsequently addressed in this chapter under Culture of Innovation.

Employment.

Appalachian County Public Schools is the county's largest employer, and not only does the district affect the employment of faculty and staff, it ultimately affects the future employability of its students. The culture and attitude toward work have not always been positive for those working in the district. Nepotism and weak work ethic were evident throughout the district. Superintendent Smith was hired to resolve the issue to meet the district's instructional goals. Ms. White shared her thoughts about the employment challenges the district faces saying, “It happens. Every school district. Some people just don't pay attention to it. I think we [board chair and superintendent] have the same mindset – if you're going to get paid to work, you work. If you don't, go somewhere else.” She went on to explain her county’s culture and changing the working mindset within ACPS schools: “In our community, we have a lot of folks that are not real aggressive about working. With their [principals] help, our schools can work towards their goals and objectives, not just sitting around gabbing all day long.”

Employment in the district can prove challenging, especially those in subjects like mathematics and science. Superintendent Smith spoke to the recruiting and retaining talent in a rural district. “If they're not performing for you, just gotta let ‘em go.” There is trepidation among school and district leadership about letting people go for subpar performance especially in a rural school district. Smith stated:

> I don't want low performing teachers to get too comfortable with thinking they got a lifelong job in our district that is gonna require more from them than any job they've ever had. You gotta be tough to work in this school district. As most rural small community schools do.

Superintendent Smith continued to address the employment of principals in rural areas in the context of innovation in schools. "Well, from the administrator standpoint, you know

I've had a high turnover of administrators. Every couple, seems like 3-4 years, we replace a high school principal." Smith implied that the hiring of new building-level leaders could impact the credence of innovation in schools.

Challenges shared among many rural superintendents can be solved through creativity and innovation, such as the college and career preparation programs that Superintendent Smith created for his students. When geographic boundaries, employment, and lack of funding produce barriers to success, district leaders strive to produce different learning opportunities. Superintendent Smith shared that even the loftiest of goals have their limitations in small rural districts saying, "Apprenticeships [are] very hard for us to do. We don't have factories; we don't have places for kids to go outside the normal nickel and dime store here there and everywhere."

Despite the issues faced, he talked about continuing to make his instructional programs better year over year. Smith says he's always thinking about how to make things better in his district, including trying to figure out how to create a way to have 100% attendance every day through virtual learning. He stated that achieving perfect attendance is possible under the law because an absent child could technically and automatically be enrolled in the virtual school. However, Smith doesn't have the necessary resources to complete his idea and shared, "I love the idea in terms of accountability – the feasibility and the logistics are overwhelming. I don't have enough staff to make sure it gets done that way. I don't have enough…I just don't have it." Superintendent Smith then shrugged his shoulders and stated he would have to leave that challenge to his predecessor, whoever and whenever that would be.

Theme 3: Culture of Innovation

Appalachian County Public Schools is recognized for its innovative programming and leadership throughout the state and nation and for its instructional programs that meet students' needs despite extreme poverty and geographic challenges. Board Chair Jenny White spoke to the history of innovative leadership in the district, which was born from necessity to problem solve. "We had a supervisor back then . . . she was a principal, and then she became supervisor, and she was supervisor for a long time. And she was very innovative. She was a lady who wanted to get things done." A one-time supervisor who led district reform efforts during KERA's inception, Ms. White has served the district in some capacity for over six decades and recounts how the system continues to evolve to ensure a good future for its students. She credits ACPS's innovative spirit to the continued evolution of the school system saying, "Now we have more children going to school and doing more things, branching out and a lot of its happened because our district has been innovative. I think we've come a long way." Ms. White states that some people in her county sometimes doubt her enthusiasm about the district's innovation as she stated, "And I can say – people may say we've not changed that much, but I can see how we've changed in these years. Sixty-five years that I've been conscious of all this change."

Research.

Research and data inform Appalachian County Public Schools' innovative decisions. Technology-infused education in rural communities, especially those steeped in poverty, helps to level the playing field and create an exciting learning environment for students. Superintendent Smith shared the importance of including research and data to

support decision-making to change the district's learning environment. According to Smith, research is vital to the process of organizational change in his district. For instance, he has included Ruby Payne's research on understanding poverty which has led to the incorporation of technology and entertainment into his district. "Ruby Payne's philosophy on entertainment is at a premium for students of high need and who are disadvantaged. Entertainment is very important. [. . .] That kinda got me started."

The superintendent started the process of change by searching for information and data from key stakeholders. "And we had to look at, we did surveys, we did at the time interest inventories, we did a lot of background at the time, prior to us going full implementation. So we had to use some data to help us decide as to whether we were ready for this or not." Superintendent Smith simultaneously sifted through district data to understand the feasibility of making a change. "So I looked at all the different resources we had, and about how many kids at computers at home, how many kids had internet access at home, and we were just astonished." Plans created through data-based decisions were of utmost importance to Superintendent Smith. He said, "We knew we could pull our own data that we had where kids gave us feedback on to say I have a computer at home, or I don't. I have internet at home, or I don't. We used that data to help guide us into the movement of full implementation of what we're talking about." Further, Superintendent Smith shared that he did not want to jeopardize the trust that he built with his board, and data assisted in communicating new ideas. He observed that "I had to use the data. I had to use and go to my board and present the information and show them the data."

Addressing a question regarding the impact of his programs, Superintendent Smith stated he evaluates the impact of each program to ensure maximum impact. One such program, Non-Traditional Instructional (NTI) days, was integrated into the district's instructional program as part of the DOI program. NTIs are instructional days that are delivered electronically when weather prohibits student-travel to school. The NTI program, created through DOI waiver, provided a continued mode of instruction. Superintendent Smith reflected,

> Now has it negatively affected our academic performance? Uh, I don't know. I can't vouch for that yet. […] It's too short a time to say yes it does or no it doesn't. My research that I did when I was getting my dissertation … I looked at that part and piece and did all of the statistical analysis, and I couldn't see a strong enough correlation to validate either way.

Superintendent Smith continues his search for different ideas to enhance and improve his district's systems. When asked where he found ideas, he stated that he reads articles for ideas and is open to visiting other districts. He said, "I did do a couple school visits early on with out-of-state schools, some of the big picture schools and things like that…I did do some of those to say, 'Wow, that's really cool!'" He mentioned that the innovative process continues and that he includes his board and district leadership team on the decision-making process. He also commented, "And we will go travel and see and do, and that's good. That's what I want to see, but I'm always trying to push that envelope for not only myself but also these folks."

School Board.

Superintendent Smith, stating that involving the school board is imperative to creating change. Thus, he works with his board and leverages their relationship to sell ideas to the district and hold stakeholders accountable through the change process. He

shared his belief about the benefits of working with the board to solve for culturally-based challenges, using the example of a possible installation of a new biometric system. The district had been having issues with staff not using the new system, so the superintendent and board worked together to present a united front. At a meeting that included the board, the superintendent, and building-level leaders, Smith and White joined forced and stated that the responsibility for using the system wasn't at a district level, rather at a building level. Smith stated, "With [the superintendent's] leadership there [at the meeting], [White] said, 'This is not the board's responsibility.' And it's not. It's everybody [principal] around the table's responsibility. So by her saying that, I could use that as leverage with them."

Superintendent leadership and change.

Appalachian County Public Schools' DOI application generated waivers, covering graduation requirements and non-traditional instructional days, that have impacted many Kentucky districts. Although the process of change began before the application was submitted and continues long after the designation was awarded, but the impact of his leadership is realized throughout the state. When asked about which innovations from the DOI application made the most impact for his district, Superintendent Smith responded, "Well, probably the biggest one [change] was the graduation piece that was in language that we had to have. And of course, NOW and again, showing you how things have changed . . . apparently, a lot of folks had the same idea because now our graduation requirements are now . . . schools have a lot more flexibility NOW then they did a decade ago." Board Chair Jenny White reflected on Superintendent Smith's problem-solving efforts, primarily related to weather and geography issues in the district. As an example,

the district would miss upward of 45 school days due to snow because running buses on the county's mountainous roads are dangerous. Superintendent Smith's leadership, vision, and DOI application granted the district waivers to create virtual learning spaces in severe weather conditions. Ms. White talked about Smith's leadership in solving for a known challenge through the creation of Non-Traditional Instructional (NTI) days. She stated, "They [the students] can work on their computers from home and do their assignments and stuff. And that's been good because we would have to be going in way up in June." Superintendent Smith later stated that 84 districts currently use Appalachian County's NTI DOI waiver.

Superintendent Smith was able to envision what was possible for Appalachian County Public Schools during the period in which he served as Director of Pupil Personnel (DPP). He understood the inherent challenges the district faced in launching any change-oriented initiative, especially in a county whose citizens sometimes undervalued education. He recalled, "As DPP, I knew I had all of the demographic data down. I knew the ins and outs and ups and downs and had a really good understanding of the community. I knew it was going to be a challenge. I knew that." Knowing the challenges did not stop him from persevering, although his course of innovation changed from a test-score driven orientation to one that emphasized providing students skills for life. Superintendent Smith reflected on his realization of the connections of their perspectives, saying:

> My expectations were probably too high to come in, and when I go back and look at my growth goals and what I want to do – making statements that all of our kids are going to be proficient by third grade. [said with an eye roll] It ain't happening. It'll never happen in this little county. As bad as I want it to . . . it's just, there's too many factors that happen outside of school that keep us from doin' it.

Smith continues to lead through a shared vision for progress and builds structures to support the evolving system. He recently worked with key community stakeholders to develop a five-year sustainability plan and believes involving the community is essential to the change management process. He said, "You know, at least we have a plan, but we have coordinated it with city and county governments. Because to me, I needed more of my message to be sold to everybody else, not just at my school." Smith's successful strategy enabled him to acquire the needed resources and support to implement the plan when state funding continues to decline.

In his position as superintendent, Dr. Smith strives to continue to create meaningful impact and considers how systems can affect the daily functioning of his staff. He discussed the desire to create additional changes in virtual schooling and the possibility of achieving perfect attendance for all students. He shared the idea that once a child was deemed absent, technology could allow them to continue their learning on-line. However, the reality of managing such a system would be significantly challenging for a district with limited resources. He reflected on this saying, “How are we making sure they [the students] are doing the work when they’re home on those [home] days and then also how are the teachers keeping up providing feedback?” He was cognoscente of the effort necessary to manage a virtual school and how that would negatively impact his staff.

Dr. Smith also discussed ideas for infusing technology into teachers' professional development delivery but talked about the resistance that he faced. He said, "Micro-credentialing, in my opinion, personalizes professional development for teachers just as

we're asking them to personalize learning for students. But you still get some pushback from it because it's almost like ‘Well, how do we do it? How do we fix it?'"

Superintendent Smith imagines similar learning environments for both teachers and students and the possible results that could stem from virtual professional development units, but resistance has hindered such progress. He said, "You should have been able to see some significant growth in letting the teachers take ownership in some of their professional development." Despite pushback and challenges, Superintendent Smith's leadership style had a positive impact on advancing student-centered learning programs in the district. His leadership and innovative work changed the culture of his district and heightened awareness and respect for instruction in his community. He reflected, "[To] take Chromebooks away from us now it would be difficult. And if we all went back to textbooks, it would be very difficult. So it would just probably be the case more so than not." Despite resistance, he continues to navigate the political atmosphere successfully, has a positive influence on stakeholders' expectations, and balances traditional instruction with technology-infused learning. He commented,

> Now we are starting to buy into the fact that, well, some of our classes need to have textbooks . . . Teachers need those, requested them. So we're listening to what our teachers are saying, but at the same time trying to not give up too much of going back 20 years versus where we're at now.

Theme 4: Communication

Communication is key to supporting innovation in Appalachian County Public Schools, and according to school board members, his ability to communicate with a wide array of constituency groups has been an essential element of district leadership. Superintendent Smith discussed the board's hiring process and what factors were key to his hiring. He confided, "Ya know, when I did my interviews, I wanted to know what the

board wanted. So, the first thing I [asked] them point-blank ‘What are you looking for?' . . . ‘What is the big issue that is going on with the board right now?' It was pretty much communications." Consequently, Superintendent Smith regularly communicates with his board, leverages non-verbal communication efforts to show his support for instruction within district schools, and communicates with the community to foster positive attitudes towards education and the school district. Smith and his board communicate to build trust among all stakeholders to further the district's goals of positively promoting the district and increasing community involvement and interest. Further, the district's graduate program, designed for high school students, requires each graduating student to be an effective communicator who can listen carefully, articulate their thoughts, and work well with others.

Trust.

Communication between the superintendent and school board members was a key factor in Superintendent Smith's selection as the district CEO. Dr. Smith candidly shared several issues regarding superintendent-board communications in the past. For example, he said, "One would know everything, and the other four wouldn't know a thing. I said I can take care of that (snap) no problem." When asked about the communication style necessary to garner the support for the unprecedented changes he led, Smith said, “It’s just constant communication. I mean, when I communicate with the board about the Chromebooks all the way to hiring, I keep them in the loop."

We continued the conversation about the transition from traditional teaching and learning to the instructional program currently in the district. Superintendent Smith emphasized the need to build trust. He felt he needed to present programming options

based on data and facts to build and maintain trust with his board. "It takes a long time to develop superintendent board relationships . . . a long time." Smith worked as DPP and was intimately familiar with the district and community-level data and leveraged his experience to build his case and trust with the board. He reflected, "They'd seen me here in the district some. I was working here in the central office, so they knew I had an understanding of the data, the parts, and the pieces of, the movement so to speak." It is evident that he continues to leverage data as a method to problem-solve, communicate, and build trust with key stakeholders.

School board members appreciate his style of communication, and he believes that is has contributed to their effectively running the school district. For example, Board Chair White explained, "A high mark for the superintendent! He keeps the board apprised of what's going on. He lets us know what's happening." She referenced district leaders before him: "It's not always been that way, but that's one of his good points." Ms. White also talked about Smith's communication style with faculty and staff as a way to build consensus, trust, and accountability. She said, "He has regular administrative meetings with them. We have had people who did not do that." In my capacity as a researcher, I was privy to an administration work session right before the superintendent's interview and was impressed by his communication style. Later during the interview, he reflected on the work session and building the strategic plan with his team earlier in the day and then the inclusion of a district program verbiage in the plan. He said, “I had to remind them that we want to embed that in there. They didn't take it on their own. I had to remind them there ‘let's not leave that out.'” He continued by saying gentle reminders are the best way to create goodwill and garner buy-in.

Leading organizational change is a complex political process, that requires clear, insightful communication to garner support for additional resources or resource reallocation. Monetary resources at Appalachian County Public Schools are scarce due to the small enrollment numbers and socioeconomic status of the county. Superintendent Smith stated that he had to share the facts with his board and logically present financial options to support the proposed innovative program. He stated, “I also had to show them that it was financially better for us to invest our monies into technology devices than it was to be in textbooks that were going to be outdated.” He went on to explain, “I had to show them the 'why' before I could just jump in and say, let's do this. I had to have a plan in place. I didn't just come in and say we need to do this."

Superintendent Smith had to garner support at the building level with principals and teachers. Changes proposed in teaching and learning would require changing content, content delivery, and assessment structures. He understood that communication style was key to an effective transition to technology-infused education. He reflected, "I couldn't just come out and say you're going to teach it. You're gonna do it this way, and this is how you're gonna do it. That was gonna be dead right off the bat." Superintendent Smith also discussed the importance of building consensus and communication through the use of site visits to other successful school districts. Although each method of communication takes time, he believed that the outcomes have been worthwhile: "It does take time effort and energy when I say we want to do something. I have to bring folks along with me. I can't just me say, ‘Oh, you need to do your PLCs this way.' They need to be able to see what I saw. You know what I'm saying?"

District communication also incorporates elements of symbolic leadership and non-verbal cues that facilitate communication with the community, which proved highly effective in changing perspectives on the value of education. The district provides students with the technology and tools to accomplish virtual learning, which is viewed as a meaningful gift in an impoverished area. While some school districts across the country may provide such students with a computer, many require that the computers stay at the school. Still, others open this opportunity for one-to-one computer ratio only for high school students. Appalachian County Public Schools entrusts all students in grades 2-12 with computers and builds instructional systems to accommodate the notion of anytime learning. Entrusting the tool to students, entrusting an open structure to learn, and supporting access to modes of higher education serves as a daily reminder in the district of the importance of education. Symbolically, it sends a powerful message to the students, parents, and grandparents of students in this impoverished area. According to Superintendent Smith, "All of our kids have Chromebooks. And they take them home, which is different than a lot of places. I'm talking about third . . . second grade up, they take them home with them because when we made the transition from textbooks to Chromebooks, we wanted it to be a seamless transition." He also stated that this transition created a change in teaching and learning styles, and an opportunity for teachers and students to hold themselves accountable. He said, “And we had to shift the mindset that education is different than an 8-3 world. Why can’t we provide a device that allows our kids to do some things and let them work on it independently?” He continued stating that a new way of learning introduces new freedoms to both student and teachers. He believed that these freedoms present inherent risks to the success of the district’s instructional

change and said, “Now that’s a big (pause) broad spectrum of freedom. But at the same time as we’ve had to make adjustments and we’ve moved because some kids can handle it and some kids can’t. So not all kids can handle freedom, just like all teachers.”

Networking.

Both study participants from Appalachian County Public Schools, Superintendent Smith and Ms. White, commented on the importance of networking throughout the community, among businesses and through sports. According to both of them, networking in and around Appalachia County connects decision-makers, solves issues, fosters new ideas, communicates status, and builds trust. Jenny White is impressed with Superintendent Smith's ability to network for the benefit of the district. She notes, "He stays busy. He goes out after things. He's collaborating with the telephone company, the electric company. " Superintendent Smith also noted the importance of networking to expand services, garner support, and communicate district successes. He shared how he networked with the business community at the beginning of his tenure to bring the internet to the county homes so that students could continue their studies at home. He said, "This was before 3G come into play. This is before all of this stuff was happening. We knew that they had it available to them. So I worked out a deal with our local telephone cooperative to provide a low, extremely low rate for students and their families so that cost was not a barrier."

Networking in rural communities occurs at a variety of places and is essential to the daily success and progress of a district. For example, Superintendent Smith explained that his district, county officials, and the local telecommunications cooperative, Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative, were working together on a grant to expand

communications services throughout the region. Smith reflected on his conversation the previous Sunday saying:

> I was told in church yesterday, that they're getting ready to [run] another loan through USDA to expand into [two area counties] too. Our own cooperative … the difference is that's how services are provided because [area] County's been toying around with AT&T, and AT&T is so big they cannot understand the localities here.

He also shared throughout the interview that sporting events, grocery stores, and school district events were also commonly mentioned as places to gather and communicate.

District sports venues.

Whether shared identity experienced through cheering for a college sports team or a recognition of sports leaders at a local level, sports are a connector for people in rural communities. Rural county sporting events are venues for networking for people of all ages, industries, and interests. Citizens of small communities are known to have an interest in the excellence of its local high school athletics program. It creates a common bond for many rural communities. Many communities generally accept rural sports coaches as leaders, and some go on to become school district-level leaders. Board Chair Jenny White referred to the superintendent's former sports leadership concerning his family and his work ethic: “And he was working on his doctorate. But he had been a ball coach. He was successful at that. And his family has always had a lot of drive . . . They have a lot of drive." Again, when speaking to his work ethic as a child, "I saw him as a youth. Like I said, he was a coach. He would be painting buildings around here in the summertime, things like that. You know that's a work ethic. He's got a work ethic, that's what I'm trying to say." She implied that his ability to lead a school district was similar to

the pressure of coaching a local team, adding, "Some people take it because they think it's an easy job and it's not!! It would run you crazy."

Superintendent Smith commented on his experience as a coach in relation to his leadership experience as a district leader. He said, "For some people, you can let them do what they wanna do, but at least they need to know the direction. What I believe is, as a former coach, you have to have the right people at the table. They have to know what the expectations are." ACPS has impacted other Kentucky districts through its DOI application, status, and waivers. Smith said, "And it took me a while to learn that concept that there's a bigger world that impact. . . that we can impact, than just our own local community. It's important, very important." He continued the discussion about navigating community politics in education leadership and his experience as a sports leader saying, “On the same side I receive more criticisms from our own local people than I do from the outside.” He continued by sharing that people from outside of the district were amazed at the progress the district made despite the district’s different negative data points. On the converse, people from the local context thought that the district wasn’t doing enough for their students. He shared his position as a leader in both sports and education, stating, “Even from a basketball coach to a superintendent, local context is tough. Very tough.”

Sense of community.

Since the area's settlement in 1780, many families who migrated here have remained here for generations. People in the county were born and raised here, went to school and church together, raised their families, and worked together. Board Chair Jenny White spoke about the decision-making processes of her board and how a strong sense of community builds trust among the members. When asked about how longevity affects the

decision-making processes of the board, Jenny White shared that the board hired Superintendent Smith to improve the schools. She implied that the board's work ethic, history in the community and relationships with each other affects its decision-making processes stating, "We had a good board too. We still got a good board. We've had a good board for a while. We agree. [. . .] The vice chair is, her dad was on the board for 40 years."

In a county previously insulated by mountains and winding roads, technology broadened its sense of community that provided unprecedented access to people, ideas, careers, and education. Further, e-communication found in social media bonded together people in the county and information spread quickly, causing an effect on its school district's instructional goals. Superintendent Smith explained the benefits of having technology-infused education in a highly connected community. Historically, social media would quickly spread information about ill students who would not attend school. "Because in my culture here, we have a lot of sickness. And a lot of people with internet now … this is the downside of Facebook. When a kid is sick, everybody knows about it." Communication through social media can conversely promote positive dialogue about the district, and Superintendent Smith understands and redirects its power. He said,

> Because it's how people perceive things, so constantly trying to keep a strong social message out there through social media. Constantly – Twitter, Instagram, Facebook. Constantly highlighting kids. Constantly highlighting programs, successful things that's going on to counter the negative. That's what I do a lot of times as superintendent. I try to balance that out and do the best I can.

Superintendent Smith communicated the importance of including the community in planned development to ensure success. However, it is evident that small-town politics may negate months of effort to create meaningful, sustainable change for students.

Superintendent Smith chooses proactive communication as a way to enhance his effectiveness and success at introducing substantive changes in the district's instructional programs. When discussing his working with his community on the development of a five-year strategic plan, he reflected, "I can distribute the work out so that everybody [community] can see it because if they can't see what you're working on, they're just going to speculate. And I want them to be able to see our plan." Additionally, he said that community businesses support the district's efforts at creating a strategic plan and marketing plan by purchasing print collateral and dividing up other marketing. Superintendent Smith acknowledged the impact of this strategic plan, marketing plan, and community efforts in shaping and generating support for education in their rural county. He said, " You know, at least we have a plan. But we have coordinated it with city and county governments (pause) because, to me, I needed more of my message to be sold to everybody else, not just at my school." Smith recognizes the power of community and the affect it can have on a school district, and stated, "In order to develop a school community here, I need those folks involved so that they can see what we're working on and see our goals and aspirations."

Central County Public Schools

On Friday nights, bluegrass music rings through the barns and brings people together from across Central County and has for generations. During recent years, Central County has produced several famous southern rock music acts. As the lead singer and guitar player in a local band said about music, it can make "People a lot more open to approaching you as an individual, and it just creates a more relaxed atmosphere." The lead singer was Dr. Chris Cashman, who is also the superintendent of Central County

Public Schools, a small, rural school district. The band, comprised of eight administrators, teachers, and students, was not only a way to fulfill his passion for music but also a strategy to create a sense of community in the school district. He said, "I think when you put yourself in that environment, and people see you out there, number one, they can have a good time; they can come and enjoy something and be part of it." The connection between the Bee Hive Strummers and the community was unintentional yet proved to be a beneficial byproduct of a leader doing what he loves.

A recent local newspaper article reported that the local Chamber of Commerce named Dr. Chris Cashman 2019 Educator of the Year. The regional university where he received his doctorate deemed him 2018 Volunteer of the Year. The university's Extended Learning and Outreach program director stated that Dr. Cashman was "an excellent choice for this award" due to his promotion of the university to his district's students and tireless support of the university. But if you ask Dr. Cashman, he would humbly say that supporting students and helping them achieve the best education they can is just part of doing what he loves. Dr. Cashman was quoted in another article saying that after 34 years, he was "truly blessed to be in this field" and stated his appreciation for "all the wonderful students and terrific co-workers I have had the good fortune to be associated with."

Founded in 1860, Central County is located in the southcentral part of Kentucky and situated on a roadway that connects to two major interstate highways. The 2010 census reported that Central County has approximately 10,000 residents; 70.5% of the residents were employed, and the household median income was $23,540. Data USA reports that personal income in the county continued to rise, and in 2017 was $35,594,

compared to the reports by the US Census estimated 2017 median household income in the United States as being $61,372. Manufacturing and retail trade contribute as the largest employers in the county, and nursing, education, and transportation are the leading sources of income in the county. The Central County Public Schools employs approximately 140 teachers, administrators, and staff.

Central County Public Schools enrolls 1600 students, and 25.3% of those students come from households who live below the national household poverty line of $29,986 (US Census, 2017). Despite these circumstances, Central County's students perform well above the state's college and career readiness target (76.7% versus 65.6%). However, they perform well below the high school combined reading and mathematics scores (51.6% versus 73.1%). Central County Public Schools is keenly focused on creating opportunities for its students, and are strong advocates for student college and career preparation and has created a flexible learning environment focused on preparing its students for life. The district's 2015 DOI application requested waivers to allow for flexible student schedules and graduation requirements to meet the needs of students' instructional and vocational needs. In the quest for personalized learning, the district calls for more and better opportunities for every student and focuses on virtual instruction to allow for career development and opportunities to attend post-secondary education. Their District of Innovation (DOI) application states the district's belief that "opportunities cannot occur without innovation, and innovation cannot occur without bold steps that challenge the status quo" (p. 1). Technology is a catalyst for much of this change, providing a path to learning anywhere, anytime, which will mirror a college and career throughout students' post-P12 life.

Theme 1: Student Preparation

Central County Public Schools is not known for outstanding test scores, but the board and superintendent agree that the main focus in their student-centric district is preparing students for life. Student preparation for college and career is the key driver to all decision-making in the district, which is evident in the interviews with superintendent and board member, district website, and DOI application. Central County also views student preparation somewhat differently than most traditional public schools. I asked board member Julie Rose if she thought schools in America were properly preparing their students for life beyond P12. She said, “No. I don’t know. (chuckle). I think we’re preparing them for the thought of what we think it should be.” She continued candidly saying, “So I don’t think we’re preparing because we don’t know what we’re preparing them for." She went on to say that test scores are not the most important mission for Central County Public Schools, nor does she believe that they are an indicator of how talented students are stating, “I mean they're important I'm not saying they're not important, but shouldn't you just try to be better than yourself the next year?” She continued by recognizing that the district doesn’t want poor scores and wants to improve, but followed up her previous point by saying, “But schools that get distinguished schools . . . are your kids any more ready to work or survive than the kid who just got a proficient or apprentice or novice in math, but he's a career plumber?”

In this rural community, student preparation can mean many things to different students, so Julie Rose states that the board and superintendent consider the whole child when creating opportunities:

> I mean you have to look at them [test scores] and everybody sighing that they're not great, but then you look at the great things you do for kids. You know it's that

> "Do we shove it down your throat and make you miserable so you don't really learn anything to perform on a test?" or "Can you go get it, raise a family, not have to get a check from the government?"

The superintendent talked about what Central County students face in their lives. Many of them have not had an adult in their family either holding a job or staying employed. Dr. Cashman talked about the career aspect of college and career preparedness, saying, "Because one of the things we begin to see and talk about so often was that ya know we had kids. . .When they're graduating, they don't even know what to do. They don't know how to go out and find a job." It is evident that under Dr. Cashman's leadership, the Central County Public Schools is committed to properly preparing its students to succeed in life.

Competing in the 21st century.

Dr. Chris Cashman uses his experience at both a top-performing school district and as a state-level instructional leader to create the district's culture and vision for education. However, Dr. Cashman is not boastful about his efforts. Rather, he quietly embraces the infusion of technology into the district as a way to prepare students to compete in the workforce and participate in post-secondary education:

> Like I say, our kids couldn't go out and be in the workforce all day if they didn't have access [to technology]. We're technically a 1:1. I don't ever make a big deal of that. I don't tout it. We don't tout the innovation thing. I kinda grapple with that sometimes.

The district made significant investments in technology and the changes over the past decade, but Dr. Cashman believes the investments are worthwhile and necessary. He talked about colleges, universities, and districts touting their use of technology in the learning environment. "I don't think we ever bragged that every kid had a pencil. . . that's where we should be. That's just where we should be."

As previously noted, Central County is a relatively poor area as compared to other Kentucky counties, and generations of its citizens have been culturally bound to the county, which may limit employment and educational opportunities. Board member Julie Rose is concerned about preparing CCPS students for new opportunities provided by future industries and technology. However, college and career options may no longer be limited to the county or region because technology has removed traditional barriers for employment and education. She also questions whether traditional assessment methods are truly indicative of a student's academic mastery or relevant in the global economy and strongly supports the district's investment in technology. Julie Rose is a veteran teacher who formerly worked in CCPS and now teaches in a district that puts substantial emphasis test performance as a base measure of instructional success. She is passionate about preparing students in her home county in other ways as well. For example, she continues to challenge the status quo when making decisions for students and believes in the power of personalized learning. "You have to know what your past is to know where your future's going. But we can't spend six months on the Civil War [when] we've got kids who need to learn how to program a computer." Discussing student preparation, we talked about the district's test scores and student performance, and she confirmed that test scores weren't the sole focus for CCPS. She stated that she would love to see better scores saying, "I'm not so sure a MAP score being a 400 or an ACT score being a 31 will help you be able to work in a community and survive."

College and career readiness.

Central County Public Schools' DOI application allowed Dr. Cashman, his board of education, in cooperation with regional and international companies, to develop a co-

op program providing opportunities for CCPS high school students. To accomplish the overarching goals of the program, the application sought a waiver to "allow the use of online and blended learning alternatives to complete the appropriate course work" in an "out of sequence of the normal course progression," giving students the flexibility to participate in the program and complete their degree. Dr. Cashman said, "It's almost a risk-free trial period for the employer, and in turn, we're taking the student and helping them know and understand while they've got us to support them . . . here's what it means to go get a job." The program has been quite successful, and the district now hosts a "signing day" for students who achieve employment status with these companies upon graduation. Signing Day for the school district is intended to be as important as signing days for athletes attaining college athletic scholarships. Board member Rose shared her thoughts about the students' grit and determination:

> Our kids know that they don't have the same opportunities as other people, but they take full advantage of the opportunities that they have. And they also understand … our students understand that we're not going to push college down your throat if that's not the path for you. It's just as important to me to sign that I'm going to work at the plumbing place as it is to sign that you're going to Harvard.

Valuing education.

Both Dr. Cashman and Ms. Rose understand the value placed on standardized testing. Ms. Rose serves as a veteran teacher in another district that is considered higher-performing. Dr. Cashman, whose dissertation focused on the correlation between student learning and state testing, has extensive experience as a director of assessment and as a former member of the State Assessment Committee. He understands the value placed on the weight of test scores, funding, and the political game that is played to ensure peak student performance. Dr. Cashman indicated that he doesn’t put full faith in test scores

because through his experience as an assessment coordinator for a larger district and also working for the state department of education. He said, “I guess I've been around long enough to know that there's some bad stuff going on out there, and I don't want to do one thing that's going to foster anybody doing something that's not 100% legitimate.” He used the students that work for the machine shop through the coop program as an example of a more meaningful metric of success in CCPS. He said, “I have no idea what they did and what they'd do on the state test. But which is a better reflection of what they're able to do and able to accomplish?”

Julie Rose shared the same sentiments from the perspectives of both teacher and board member when she said, "I mean they're important I'm not saying they're not important, but shouldn't you just try to be better than yourself the next year?" She continued to explain the importance of career and life survival over test scores, stating that the score may not accurately prove the worth of the student.

> They want to compare. They'll put you in the [news]paper. . . We're this far ahead! But you never see 20 years later comparing how many kids are out there working in this versus…you don't see that comparison? Are you work ready? Says your work ready, but let's see what you got!

Dr. Cashman also shared his thoughts on test score performance, the struggles of a rural district, and the district’s investment in preparing students for real-life: “You know what we’re dealing with these days. So the metrics we have and that are used as state guide. (pause) I don’t know that I really put that much stock in them. But I know we’re changing lives. I know we are.”

Theme 2: Rural Identity

Central County Public Schools is known as one of the poorest and relatively insulated counties in the state. School board member Julie Rose discussed students in the

school where she grew up and has lived her entire life that she now represents. She said, "They don't know they're poor, which is good. This is still a very rural agricultural-based town. They don't know that. They won't know that ‘til like I did when they go off to college." Land in Central County has been recently advertised for sale in a national publication and is a draw for people across the country. The selling of hundred-to-four-hundred acres plots at prices well below the national average has changed the dynamics of the county and district's schools. Ms. Rose explained the dynamic of the new residents: "Some people want to have a farm and land. And so you have a lot of people who have moved in. And the names…I used to know every single kid at graduation and their families, and now [I only know] 70%. . . 30% of people that just moved in in the last couple of years."

Community.

Superintendent Dr. Chris Cashman spoke to the importance of community in a rural school district and the need to preserve rural identity in small towns. He stated that the former superintendent, who had served the district for almost seven and one-half years, had a difficult ending saying, “[Her administration] had closed the two outlying elementary schools. And it doesn't matter who does it, whether it's a local person, that is never ever going to be popular in a small community.” Ms. Rose also explained the issues with the previous superintendent's decision to close the community schools, considered the hubs of the communities. She observed, it was “Like she just wanted to build a new school and put everybody in the middle, which in theory sounds great, but when she did that, she completely closed down two communities.” The end result is that when the schools closed, businesses didn't thrive, and people had to leave.

The school district needed the next leader to intimately understand the community, the students, and the situation. Ms. Rose described the situation and the concern that the board members shared. Then, Dr. Cashman, who had grown up in Central County but worked in a neighboring district, showed interest in the position. Rose explained that if an outside candidate had become the next superintendent, "It wouldn't have been local, and we would still have been in the same mess we were in." She continued, "Like a Godsend. I don't know what your belief is, but I believe God puts people where He's supposed to put them. I think He put him [Dr. Cashman] here." Dr. Cashman confirmed this sentiment stating that community connection was a priority for the board and a priority for his hiring. "I think that was a bit of an advantage, being considered a local person and somebody that probably knew and understood what was taking place and what was going on." Ms. Rose remembered how the board felt about the hiring of the next superintendent, before Dr. Cashman became a candidate:

> The people wanted somebody who was about the people. They wanted somebody who, you know, the dollar store manager would come down and say they wanted somebody who was personable. That was high on our list. We wanted somebody who connects to the people, understands the people because a small town is a small town. Like people know people, and they want to know that you're here for the good of the kids. So we needed that. That was a top priority.

Dr. Cashman was hired in 2013 and quickly began the transformation of Central County Public Schools. He discussed the district's change process, about community and board support, and how the changes transpired. He also discussed the type of leadership that the board required saying, "I think they wanted some stability and I think they saw that, and I know it may sound a tad bit contradictory to say that they wanted stability and they wanted change." Dr. Cashman had the necessary experience in both instructional

roles and innovative contexts in another district and knew how to manage the change properly.

Ms. Rose also realizes her role as a board member in the district's changing context, and focuses helping connect and navigate the community to benefit the superintendent as well as the district. When running errands or attending community functions, she said:

> I say, "Hey! Is everything going ok at school?" to parents because you need to know that. 'Are you upset about anything?' And people will call you when your people know you. I mean, I get phone calls about buses and lunches. . . And I don't mind those calls because who else are you going call? You aren't going to call the superintendent for "school lunches are bad" I mean, why would you do that?

Although rural districts are challenged in some ways, there are plenty of advantages to having a closely-knit, rural community. In a 2019 newspaper article, Dr. Cashman spoke about the beginning of his teaching career: "When I taught at North Central in the mid-late 80s, there were roughly 260 students K-8. It felt like I knew every child in the school and their extended families. The school was the center of the community." Dr. Cashman continues to connect with the students even though the number of students has grown exponentially, and the bond between instructional leaders and their students in their small district is unique. Ms. Rose credits the superintendent for effectively connecting with their community and appreciates his efforts to develop relationships with the students. She explained how the study body and community finds value in his efforts saying, "The students know them as a person. [The superintendent] goes in and plays music with their kids and invites them to round table discussions, and they have lunch. [. . .] [He] eats with people just to talk to people just because you need that."

District leaders, faculty, and staff maintain personal connections with students and want to give them the best education possible. Although the district is not able to offer as many instructional courses and opportunities, Ms. Rose stated, "Do I wish we had more? Yes. But we would also need twice as many kids to have those, and I don't wish that because then I think you lose your personal connection." She continued, "So it's like the lesser of the evils. Let me give you what I can with what I have versus 'I just can't give to you because we're so big.'" She discussed the benefits of smaller, rural districts, including the benefits of graduation ceremonies. As a board member, Central County Graduation Day has always been one of her favorite times of the year because she knows the graduates. Most of the time, she is friends with their parents. "It is a big deal because when they walk across the stage . . . they know all the board members. And they say 'Hey! Hey! Miss Julie!' Rose loves the connection with the students she teaches. She stated that as a teacher in a much larger district, the size of the district often prevented making a connection with her students.

Geography.

Central County is geographically situated between larger towns and highways but has been generally isolated until recent years. Hundreds of acres are now home to many new families, which left many local citizens questioning the new transplants' motivation. Ms. Rose stated with a perplexed look, "People just move in [to the county], which is strange. I don't know if I could ever do that. Just find a place you didn't know." She shared that locals were initially skeptical of the newcomers saying, "Your first thought is 'Are they running from something? Are they leaving something?'". She continued, "But

most of them [newcomers] just really wanted to be able to have a little money? And the people from California are like ‘We have all kinds of money here!'"

Ms. Rose and her fellow board members are passionate about quality education in Central County and believe that the district should provide the best possible education for their students. When speaking about the former superintendent shutting down community schools to build a central campus, she shared the concern and pushback community members felt. A native of Central County, Ms. Rose was a coach of three sports and teacher in the district at the time. "You should be able to keep your kids where you live, in my opinion. You should have a good enough school system where you live that you don't have to take your kids 40 minutes to somewhere else.” She fought to keep the community schools and left the district for various reasons after the schools closed.

Employment.

Julie Rose spoke about the challenges of recruiting and hiring district leaders in a rural community. Central City's location is close enough to respected teaching universities and districts that can pay higher wages CCPS can. She remembered the process of hiring Dr. Cashman, who transferred from a larger, wealthier district:

> So when he agreed to even apply … we were like, Oh my goodness! Because it was truthfully a bit of a pay cut for him honestly. I mean, he was on the ladder. He probably would've been their superintendent if he had stayed one more year. And I think he probably knew that, but he prayed and prayed and prayed about it, and talked to people about it and prayed about it and felt like he could do more good here.

Born and raised in Central County, Dr. Cashman humbly explains the advantage he had as a local candidate. " I think you know that was a bit of an advantage being considered a local person and somebody that probably knew and understood what was taking place and what was going on."

Although recruiting and retaining instructional talent is a district concern, student career preparation is also a priority. The district's size and location create funding challenges, which affects course offerings and career preparation opportunities. Ms. Rose stated, "We don't have the numbers to employ the people to offer a lot of different things. Like when you have a school system with 15,000 kids, you can have 40 electives. We don't have that opportunity because we don't have the funds for that." She explained the complexities of building the district's co-op program. "We have to outsource. We have to use trade schools, technical colleges . . . So our kids know that there are other opportunities elsewhere, but they also know you might be a class of 60 versus a class of 4." She explained that a small district fosters a unique bond among its students, and how that is different than the student body of a larger district. She said, “Our kids value each other. You should see them (cheering) ‘You gotta job working there! That's great!' Our kids are really good about not segregating the top 10 versus the bottom 10. They're meshed in together."

Theme 3: Culture of Innovation

Central County Public Schools is recognized as an innovative district despite the many economic, geographic, and instructional challenges it faces. The superintendent and school board members worked with school leads and community members to create an instructional environment quite different from others during past years. Central County has worked over the past six years (2013-2019) to transform and improve its education system. In retrospect, results are positive, and Ms. Rose acknowledged contributions by the superintendent and board members, particularly their decision-making processes that supported and sustained the purposeful change. She also credits innovative instructors

who are willing to take educated risks in the classroom for the sake of continued growth. She acknowledged “What's great today is out of date tomorrow,” and said, “We [hope we] have enough staff people who are willing to step out of the box and say to keep ahead, let’s try these things.” She concluded, “Somebody sometimes has to be the first people to try, and I hope that we’re those people sometimes that we say we’ll try first.”

It is evident that Central County Public Schools’ culture is student-centric, and stakeholders’ actions reflect this culture. District stakeholders stay focused to ask for resources to support only student-related activities and programs. Ms. Rose considers the board lucky because, “I think it's because most people know most of us. If it's not about kids, you probably shouldn't ask any of us because we'll probably say no. But if it's about kids, we'll do whatever we can to try to help them.”

Although the district has been recognized for its bold decisions and innovative educational programs, Ms. Rose states that the board wants to continue efforts at innovation and contribute to offering future opportunities for district students. "Hopefully we just see progression where kids are. Hopefully, we start doing a better job, like in elementary, of saying these are some opportunities. Opportunities that people have now versus what we had as kids, that we do a better job." The superintendent supported this statement by stating the district’s commitment to providing as many opportunities for their students as possible. He stated that the district doesn’t have a mission statement or vision statement, but “We do talk a lot about opportunity and options. And particularly being in a small community. Any opportunity and option we can bring to these kids that's, what I want done.”

Research.

Innovation in Central County Public Schools occurs under the direction of the superintendent and with school board support. Although the school district has limited resources, the school board trusts that the superintendent will provide them with evidence of program effectiveness that will enable them to continue to support his idea. This has been the case since his being hired six years previously. Board member Rose shared that fellow board members are open to ideas saying, "It's ok to try something as long as you've done the research to see if it is even a valuable risk. Because there are risks, and there are valuable risks. It's ok to take a risk if its . . . because of justification."

When I asked Dr. Cashman how he began the change process in Central County that eventually led to the DOI application, he stated that the innovation process began through his experience in another district coupled with and escalated by his attendance at a Kentucky Department of Education sponsored event. A superintendent from Salt Lake City, Utah spoke about his district's instructional environment. Dr. Cashman explained, "I always had this vision of what a public school could be. A more flexible model or kids can kinda come and go and do." He recalled his experience, listening to the speaker for an hour and realizing that this superintendent had created an environment that he had always hoped for saying, "He had an open school that was what I thought this is it! And so I hung around talked to him at length that day sent him emails after. A year or two later, I had the opportunity to visit his school." Dr. Cashman made two more trips and also took his leadership team to experience the environment saying, "We go down and take a team from our middle school. The [CCPS] counselor comes out and her very words was 'I cannot not do this.' That's what she said when she walked out."

The district has grown accustomed to the superintendent providing reliable information about innovative ideas, a practice that has infiltrated the instructional culture of the district. When asked why the district's teachers are willing to push the envelope, Ms. Rose explained that innovation at the school and classroom level now mirrors innovation at the central office. School-level leaders support educated experimentation, as she explains, “It is much more acceptable to do something crazy and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work [. . .] versus working in a district where you might be cut because you were doing [innovative things].”

Central County's innovative culture strikes a balance between students at the center of every instructional decision and respectful risk-taking by the instructional professional. Ms. Rose explained that teachers are more apt to experiment with peer-support and research-based practices saying, “If you do the research beforehand, it’s really not experimenting. Does that make sense?” She continued, “There has to be a plan in progress, and it has to be detailed and thought out before you can say ‘Let’s just do it.’”

Creativity.

Board members from Central County knew Dr. Chris Cashman long before he became superintendent. The son of a local farmer, he was known for his ingenuity and work ethic. Dr. Cashman shared the story of his serendipitous path into the superintendency. His career progressed from being a classroom teacher in the community school at the north end of the county (one of the two closed by the superintendent hired before him) to the University of Kentucky where he completed a degree in the agricultural education. He reflected by saying, "I liked animal science. I liked economics.

Those are the two I like. But ag education kinda gives you a breadth of everything, and so primarily that's why I did it." He returned to [his home] and worked as a substitute teacher while helping his dad on the farm. The principal of the CCPS middle school called on a Sunday afternoon in 1985 "…to ask me if I'd finish the year in his place substituting. And it just clicked. And so that summer I was offered the full-time job that he had had, and here I sat (pause) doing an interview with you."

Board member Julie Rose often comments how lucky the district is to have Dr. Cashman as their superintendent, adding "I always [saw him] doing really innovative things." She states that she's known him for most of her life on both a personal and professional level. "And just to see his progression … like his thought process has always been that way… Like I've known him for so long, he'll come up with a solution to…but he's very innovative in all of his thought processes like his farm and his home." Ms. Rose talked about the dire financial condition that Dr. Cashman inherited as a new superintendent. She spoke to how the superintendent turned programs [budgets] from deficits to a surplus that allowed the district to afford new innovative programming. I asked Dr. Cashman if he'd had any formal business training to enhance his abilities as an instructional leader. He said that he hadn't but his father, a farmer, taught him much about running a business, solving for challenges, and balancing budgets:

> "He said you'll never get rich picking up pennies, but the guy that stops to pick up a penny will be a whole lot better off because that mindset, every, everything counts. And that's what we try to do here. Look at stuff different. Look at everything in a way – how can we do this? Not just to save money but to be more efficient. […] And so I just try to bring that concept to whatever we do. Can we find a cheaper and better way to do whatever we're doing?"

This fiscally conservative and conscientious mindset is evidenced in pictures I took of the central office before the interview. The board of education offices are located in a

repurposed, clean, freshly painted building erected in the 1950's that was once home to Central County High School. The dual-purposed building is also home to one of the programs listed in the DOI application, a co-op bakery that is open to the public.

Risk-taking.

Dr. Cashman was a fiscally conservative superintendent with 34-years of experience in instruction and technology-infused education. However, his desire to innovate appeared to be an innate quality. Dr. Cashman's wife, his high school sweetheart, has long understood his innovative thought processes. When discussing the need for change, innovation, and his innate sense of systems process, selling his ideas is not always easy, but he also understands that constant and fast-paced change is not for everyone.

> I was like "Why aren't these people as excited about this as I am? Don't they understand what they want?" And I had to back up and remind myself, you know that not … my wife tells me a lot of times, not everybody's like you and that's a good thing (laugh).

I asked Dr. Cashman about his process for implementing monumental change throughout his district. He told me that the process of change takes time and that in fact, the process of change and building confidence in his district took longer than he expected: "We're just now getting in 2019 what I had hoped and thought we'd be at in 2014. And we're still not there, but we're a whole lot closer." He seems to reason that "everything from push back to trepidation to 'I don't know what you're talking about' to 'I've got to see it.'"

I asked Ms. Rose her opinion as to who are the most influential people in the school district concerning innovative organizational change processes. Having a background both as a board member and veteran teacher, she said that the veteran

teachers weren't necessarily the most influential or respected, and that teachers who have good rapport with all students or teachers are good leaders of change. "Those people just have a way of delivering information and showing how something works without being intrusive to other people's rooms or overbearing to other people." She reflected on the change process in Central County, the involvement of the board, the district's experimentation with new ideas, and results. Ms. Rose stated that building capacity among teachers is important to the change process, and choosing the right teacher-leaders is vital to the innovative process. "We were precise on who we chose. You have to find those people and have them do it to prove that it works under the guidance under the director of instruction and people that have the knowledge." Rose confirmed that there will be people in the change process who will always resist change but whose minds can be changed with the right leadership examples. "There's people who will say, 'I'm not doing that!' until they see the good in the kids." Good model teachers are key to building-level innovation, and although change can be scary, she said change is good. "I think teachers feel like they lose the control, but in a sense, they're giving kids control of what they're learning."

Board member Rose talked about the benefits of change management processes in a small rural district. She understands the struggles of managing a district with limited resources but believes that innovation in the personalized learning space in Central County has been successful because of the district's small size. Based on her experience as a teacher in both a small and medium-sized district, she stated, "You can't put 50 kids in a classroom and get anything done because you're teaching to the masses. Like I hope you're just getting what I'm putting out. Because you [large district] don't have the space

for that. . . and we do have that here. . . because we're small. Doesn't mean you can't be mighty."

Funding.

The superintendent ended our conversation by answering the question about continuing the innovative work in his district. I asked him about his long-term plans and if he felt that he had the resources to extend and continue his innovative work. The superintendent, who is known as a fiscally conservative person, stated that he is concerned about budgeting in communities with small enrollment:

> Based on past history of the recent years I am very concerned about what our future holds. And think it can get difficult quick. Not just for [our] county, for everybody. But small rural districts I fear could suffer quicker than others. Because there's just not a lot of room to move. It's just not there. […] The worry in the coming years – it could get it could get really tight. And that concerns me. It really concerns me. Yeah. Like I say I don't sit around and lose sleep over it and wring my hands. Uh, I think we'd be foolish not to know that it's a very real possibility and we need to have in the back of our minds a preparedness should that come.

Theme 4: Communication

It is evident that communication is essential to fostering trust and building innovative systems in organizations. In retrospect, the converse may also be true. In many circumstances, the lack of communication may contribute to animosity and uncertainty. Consequently, communication may be a top priority for Central County Public Schools' next superintendent. Board member Julie Rose spoke of the lack of verbal and non-verbal communication between the former superintendent and the community. Julie Rose stated that the community would never see the superintendent, and community members took notice and considered her disinterested and disengaged. The next superintendent needed to be different. She said that, "We wanted somebody who connects to the people

understands the people because a small town is a small town. Like people know people, and they want to know that you're here for the good of the kids. That was a top priority." Communication, like student preparation, is a prevalent theme that emerged during interviews in Central County interviews and was viewed as a tool used to build a culture of trust, innovation, and respect for education.

Trust.

Trust among district leaders, board members, educators, and the community is a key factor in supporting innovation in Central County Public Schools. For six years, the superintendent has prepared, cultivated, and integrated innovative practices into a traditional instructional environment. In retrospect, communication was a top priority in hiring a new superintendent. Dr. Cashman talked about the interview process with the board saying, "The first thing I did was ask them what they wanted. I said, 'Do you want to know every little [detail] or just the facts?' And as I said they're very busy people." He explained that they wanted just the facts, and wanted regularly occurring information, but also explained that as major issues arose, he connects with them in a timely manner to keep them informed.

The board hired Dr. Cashman specifically to change the business of Central County Schools, but despite the experience and familiarity of the leader, organizational change takes time, a reallocation of resources, and an amount of risk-taking. When asked about the decision-making process for innovation and change, the superintendent stated that the board was supportive of the changes. "Trust. Just trust. And we talked about that a lot early on." It is evident that he built trust in the school district through constant, clear communication that was based on sounds understanding of what would be most effective

in the community and also was informed by research studies. Board member Rose confirmed Dr. Cashman's statement. "This board is willing to try just because they are also, [the superintendent] is not going to present something unless he has done the research on it and seen some good from it. They just know." He continues to communicate with each board member in the manner that best suits their personality to build the best possible working relationship. He also wants the board to trust him to do his job as he trusted his staff to do theirs. "And I said when we get to the point … and you all have to trust ME … to oversee this and to share with you exactly what's happening. And I said if we ever get to the point [that] we don't have that then we've got major issues. And I've got 'em with my people if I can't trust them to tell me."

The superintendent maintains weekly communication with the board to keep them informed about occurrences in the district. He said, "And so early on I would do what I called *Board Notes* and generally once a week maybe three times a month would've been better. Here's the highlights of what's happening this week and here's what's coming up." Ms. Rose confirmed Dr. Cashman's statements about his communication patterns, which seems to satisfy the board. "We get weekly board notes. Like here's what's going on, construction-wise, here's what's going on. But then sometimes you get a text message to all of us that says 'Hey! Heads up. Here's what going on.' So he's really good at communicating. He'll say, 'No one replied to my message and I'm going to start calling you guys.' and he would (chuckle)." The superintendent found that each board member had their own style of engagement. "I quickly found out that about after four months, that I had 2 or 3 board members that weren't the best in the world on email. I was sending in

all email. I thought they were reading them. (laugh) Not necessarily. And so I started sending hard copy at least three of them."

The superintendent began to garner trust upon his hiring, including the non-verbal cues like just taking care of district business. Julie Rose explained, "And that's the reason when we started when we all came on the board that's the reason our cafeteria fund was you know $1M in the hole, and now we're like $600K to the good. It's those kinda things where it just takes somebody saying, "No here's what you need to do". These initial steps to building trust created a path to innovation at the district level and built relational equity between the board and superintendent. I asked the superintendent what communication style works best to gain trust and move ideas forward, and he said using stories of students and graduate experiences help convey the message of change. He shared an example of infusing the Canvas software into the CCPS learning environment to create virtual learning opportunities for their students. "Probably more so the storytelling … the telling of what could be. I think they made the connection of 'Hey! This is what students are seeing in college.'" The board members know many of the students and then trust the story and the message. Ms. Rose added:

> Sometimes we'll get a "Hey! Here's some articles that I think are interesting." and then we'll do a little research and I'll say "I know where he's going with this." Because if somebody reads this and goes "This is not going to work." he probably knows ahead of time. And if everybody were to say "No." then he would probably not pursue it. Because why would you go to battle if everybody is against you?

Trust among these key stakeholders has been built over time, since many of the decision-makers have known each other since childhood. She stated, "I'm not going to say guys this is a great idea and it's going to help our kids if it's not." Board members' professional careers also affect dissemination, translation, and understanding information.

Ms. Rose said that this trust plays an important part in making decisions, and the members rely on each other's expertise to clearly vet and discuss district concerns. She shared, "Our chairman was a teacher before he, he's like farm supply now, and does business. So if the other three don't understand something they'll say, 'Explain that to me, Julie, in layman's terms.'" She continued, "But I trust them enough to know if somebody comes in here and we're building a new building for them to say yeah that's the best bid when it's not."

Not all board members want to be intimately involved in all decision-making matters. Julie Rose spoke to the decision-making process of the board saying, "Now we have a couple of board members who say, 'We trust you…just go do it.' They're going to trust us to do the right thing." In an environment that is culturally open to risk-taking, trust among board members is important, especially to those intimately unfamiliar with learning environments. She shared the discussion points made around building the co-op programs noted in the DOI application saying, "I can remember one board member said 'I don't think that's going to work because old school adage everybody's at math at X time and reading at X time and science at X time.'" After much discussion, the board came to resolution. She explained, "I think we just said let's just try it and come up with some plans." She concluded by sharing the board's thoughts about the importance of open communication, taking risks, and organizational change in her district. About trust and risk-taking Julie Rose stated, "Now you won't know all upfront when you try it, but you will at least have an understanding of what we're trying to do and where we're going."

Style.

As a board member, Ms. Rose appreciates Dr. Cashman keeping her apprised of district happenings either via email, text, or phone call. She said, “I enjoy that that I can see that [board notes] because I’m not here [in district] every day, so I would like to hear about it from him before I hear about it from Tim’s mom or ya know Kevin’s grandma, calling mad about something. I already know it before Kevin’s grandma calls me.” Dr. Cashman concurred, stating, “So that has just kinda had a natural flow to it and they know they can contact me whenever and I’ll get right back with them whether its text call or whatever they do.”

Ms. Rose also spoke about Dr. Cashman’s communication style with the community and parents. He strives to keep an open-door policy in his district to encourage all community stakeholders to be a part of the change of educational systems, processes, and values. Board member Rose is impressed with the way the superintendent works with parents, “Because he’s a people person and he actually listens to people. When people come in with legitimate concerns about their kids, they’ll bark and yell and he really listens. And he takes notes and he says, ‘What can we do to help your kid?’”

Dr. Cashman was hired to drive change in Central County Public Schools and realized the style in which he delivered his message was essential to the success of his change efforts. He said, "I knew I had to be careful because I worked with people who come from other places. I could not come in here and say "in [former district]" and "in [former district]". People don't want to hear that. I get it and I know it. So I'm really careful, I learned to use ‘my experience has been.' (laugh)." Rose supported this statement by saying, "He's very non-authoritative. Like he can make you believe it's your

idea even if it's not. Because his plan is that good … when you're listening, you're like I should've thought of that I should've already done that." Julie Rose continued her thoughts on Dr. Cashman's leading change and his communication style with the board.

> He's really good about – he never been one to have a whole plan done and here's what we're doing. [. . .] If this group of people really is for and about kids and they all disagree? Then why you would be like. . . then it becomes a dictatorship I guess and then you'll cut off your nose to spite your face. But I don't think he sees the world that way? I think he really wants people to be a part of a good thing.

Superintendent spoke to the importance of working with the board, faculty, and staff throughout the change process:

> I don't think we ever got into battle of the wills. I hope I never wanted to betray. . . sometimes central office goes we gotta be like that because Moses lost that 11th commandment that if you could find it, it said "Central office and schools shall be in conflict constantly." (chuckle) I don't think we had that. If we did, they hid it well from me which I'll give them credit for doing that.

Networking.

Dr. Cashman shared his story of how his innovative learning environment came to me. He explained that he had worked in a larger school district whose district instructional leadership team would periodically share ideas in a group thinktank situation. He then joined Central County Public Schools but continued to envision a learning environment that met the needs of students in his district. He stated, "And through that process and through hearing people and being connected with folks throughout the state."

Dr. Cashman also spoke about his first year at Central County Public Schools and the opportunity to apply for a $100,000 grant. I asked how he learned about this grant, and he said, "I'm trying to remember how I even come across it…uh. I mean I think it was just some of the listservs I was part of, discussion boards, something." This grant

was the initial catalyst for the district's change efforts which led to the district's digital conversion. The journey of change continued as the superintendent researched innovative districts across the United States, "Uh ended up connecting with a superintendent in Alabama who because I began to look…Salt Lake City … as neat as it was, was still Salt Lake City. And [Alabama district town] is not Salt Lake City, so we found a little town in Alabama and I connected with the superintendent there. And they look a whole lot like us." He continues to network with schools across the state and country in the quest for continued progress.

The superintendent networks to connect, collaborate, and share ideas, and sometimes he changes people's perspective. "I ran into this guy in the airport in Nashville at midnight. He and I are waiting alone for a shuttle. I found out he's from [larger neighboring town] and he found out I was from Central County and we get to talking. He finds out I'm in public education and I found out he doesn't care much for public education." Dr. Cashman spoke to this man's frustration. As a business owner for a successful welding company, he felt as though young workers coming to him for employment were woefully unprepared. "Very professionally and politely, he tells me how negligent in skills his workers are when they come to him. Very professionally and politely, I share with him some of the issues and challenges we face on a daily basis to even get these kids to school and through the day." Today this business owner is an active partner in the district's coop program and has most recently hired several CCPS graduates to work for his company.

Community.

Communication and connecting with the community were top priorities in the hiring of Dr. Cashman, and board members are pleased with the results. Julie Rose shared that Dr. Cashman is visible throughout the community, attends Central County school events, and connects with the schools throughout the day. “I’m going to give kudos to [the superintendent] and the board people … they’re very, the students know them as a person. Like [the superintendent] goes in and plays music with the kids and invites them to round table discussions and they have lunch. He eats lunch at a school every day. Eats with people just to talk to people just because you need that.” In turn, Dr. Cashman stated that the board is also active and networks with his board often. “They’re highly involved. The chair’s got two sons highly involved in athletics; the vice-chairs son really excelled in band. So just depending…another guys gotta granddaughter involved in athletics. And so yeah between all that…"

Although small, rural districts have their challenges, a tightly woven culture has its benefits. Rose discussed the importance of communication among CCPS board members, and how knowing people for so long can help break down political barriers in decision-making. I asked how long the board had been together and if she thought it affected the decision-making process.

> As a group? The five of us probably – is this the sixth year? That all of us have been on there together? And it’s been the same people the whole time. But I knew them as people before. Like I know them personally so that if I had a problem with Tim, I could go to Tim and go “Alright Tim, I don’t get where you’re coming from and I need to be able to understand that.” I think that helps a lot just knowing people.

Lake County School District

Lake County's community, formed in 1820, focuses on providing the best services for its citizens. The county government's mission statement, paraphrased to preserve anonymity, exemplifies this focus: the county official team will meet the needs of its citizens and provide the best quality of life through innovative leadership. A large lake borders the county that contributes to the "best quality of life" and is currently a big attraction for retirees and sportsmen. The Kentucky News Era stated after leading Lake County to one of the best districts in the region, the superintendent announced his retirement concluding ten years of service. The year 2010 would begin an era of transformation for its school system, whose work in personalized learning would connect. When asked her opinion on whether schools were properly preparing schools for the future, Board Chair Carole Lowry replied:

> I feel like so many schools are still doing the traditional school that we've been doing for 200 years. Sit in a row, and you know, here's what the teacher is going to tell you. Now I'm going to test you on it. I don't think that's preparing kids for the real world even now let alone when they graduate.

Theme 1: Student Preparation.

The board hired Superintendent Joe Clark in 2010 and articulated the need to focus on creating a new learning environment to prepare a 21st century graduate. Clark shared that before his predecessor's hiring, the district's student performance was at a level that put them in *voluntary assistance* status with the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). KDE took control of the district and he stated, "One of the key things that they discovered was they were using more effective school standards at the time instead of the state adopted standards. There wasn't a good alignment. That was one of the big shifts that was made." As a result, the following ten years' focus was building a

primarily test-prep driven culture that produced an instructional program with "a lot of drill and kill stuff". This culture created strong student-testing performance with students who, as Superintendent Clark stated, were “compliant” and as Board Chair Lowry stated, “not engaged”.

From 2010 to 2012, Superintendent Clark and his executive team assessed schools by participating in nearly 1200 walk-throughs, an exercise in which administrators or teachers leaders walk through classrooms assessing instructional practices. The exercise is generally a form of professional development, internal research, and program development for instructional improvement. He reported, "One of the things that we observed was really exactly what the board said which was that we have students that are in classrooms and we have good students, and they're doing exactly what they're asked to do. They're compliant. But what we're not seeing … rich, robust engagement in the classrooms." The same year that Clark took his position as superintendent, the United States Department of Education introduced the National Common Core Standards. These standards served as the district's catalyst to create systemic change. The new superintendent devised a plan to change the learning cultures of the school. In 2012, Superintendent Clark and a team of three administrators participated in an innovation-focused P20 university-sponsored program. Simultaneously, Clark researched best practices for innovation in districts across Kentucky and the United States of America. Inspired by the innovative work of High Tech High located in San Diego, California, he flew a team for a site visit and shared his thoughts after this experience. He thought, “Our students aren’t getting these kinds of experiences that we just observed. Our kids are going to be working for those students.” He continued, “I mean, they can’t compete with

them. They're going to be their employees. That's not what we wanted for our kids. We wanted THEM to be having the same experiences we observed at High Tech High."

Lake County has spent recent years transforming the district into a personalized learning and innovative environment. Clark stated, "Because our world [the district] had been as I described to you, the culture had been very test prep driven. […] …which really wasn't equipping them with those 21st-century skills that were really important." Board Chair Carole Lowry reported that district research and following national examples of innovative teaching and learning initiatives have proven to be positive influences on the district. It is evident she's proud of the way students engage in their learning experiences, how they prove their mastery of the content, and how this change affects the community. "I also feel that there's so much value in personalized learning and project-based learning and teaching kids how to think and how to find information. You know, teach them to be lifetime learners, don't just teach them a test."

The board's summative evaluation of Superintendent Joe Clark provides evidence of his successful tenure as leader of the Lake County Public School District and his relationship with the school board, particularly concerning preparing students for 21st-century job opportunities:

> As evidenced by the above evaluation, the Board feels Mr. Clark is doing an excellent job. He is a passionate instructional leader who is leading our district with a next-generation leadership focus designed to produce graduates with 21st Century competencies that will assist them in being successful in today's world. Mr. Clark is an excellent fiscal manager who keeps the focus on academics, the business we are in. Additionally, he excels with collaborative partnerships and brings multiple opportunities to Lake County Schools and our students.

College and career readiness transition.

Board Chair Lowry stated the district's student-transition rate into college is high, and approximately 90% of Lake County High School students graduate. She stated that LCPS has "a good number of students who go onto college " and is particularly proud of the district's participation in a dual-credit program. "We do have a lot of students graduating with either a year behind them or more towards their college, which is really, really awesome." She shared the location of post-secondary institutions, which may affect graduates college transition rates; two community colleges are 30-minutes from their small town, a regional university is less than an hour's drive, and another is less than two hours away.

Although Lake County High School has a college driven culture, Ms. Lowry expressed her concern for the students before the district's transformation. Although the students tested well, a distinct divide existed between success in test preparation and student mastery. She stated, "Even when we were teaching to the test, we were having students going to college and having to take remedial classes like in Math and English, even though they had done well and made good grades." Further, as a board member who represents all students, Ms. Lowry was concerned about students who weren't going to college. "We were all about 'Let's graduate people who were going to college,' but what about the larger population that probably wasn't going to college?" Ms. Lowry was passionate that each graduate acquires the soft-skills required in 21st-century careers: respect for others, punctuality, and ability to communicate effectively, to name a few. She spoke about her personal experience as a government contractor. Employees are expected to be able to collaborate, communicate, think critically, be self-directed, as well

as problem-solvers. “That’s the kind of student I want Lake County to produce so that when they get outside of these four walls here, they’re able to communicate and succeed in this ever-changing world we live in.”

Equity.

Creating opportunity and ensuring that each student has an opportunity to excel and succeed was the central focus of the school board and community leaders. School board members wanted to change the learning environment and hired Joe Clark as superintendent. The board charged Clark with creating a learning culture that produced students capable of mastering the new national standards, as well as provide them opportunities to learn applicable soft skills necessary in 21st century employment. Superintendent Joe Clark shared, "We don't really have an equity issue when it comes to race. We do have a significant African American population. But our real issue that we have in terms of equity is around socioeconomic status. I mean, I will tell you it's the haves and have nots." He felt that to change the entire culture of Lake County Public Schools, the district that had once assumed and modified instruction based on the economic status of the child needed to change. "I think that is even, I think that's a bias that we have to work on even with our staff to make sure that we don't have lower expectations for students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds."

Valuing education.

Lake County Public Schools hired Superintendent Joe Clark to focus on changing the culture of its schools to reflect mastery of learning and soft skills through personalized learning strategies. The district changed the method of instructional delivery and academic focus, which pulled energy from what Joe Clark explained as the " 8 to 1

assessments [which] was occurring every Friday. Stop drop and test basically." Joe Clark then pulled rolled posters from behind his desk that the district formerly used to track test performance as compared to other districts and stated that he keeps them but hasn't looked at them since his first year in the district. The former culture's constant assessment structure led the district to rank in the top twenty districts, but changed instruction under the new leadership which also realized significant decreases in student test scores. Ms. Lowry sat on the board before the transition and currently holds the position of board chair. She stated that the district culture ten years ago is vastly different from today. "Well the classrooms were very traditional I would say, and it was a culture of you've got to excel on this test. Constantly about the test. That's my perception." She remembers the requests from the community members and business leaders over ten years ago to produce a better, well-rounded, engaged graduate.

Technology and new instructional standards have been catalysts for change in Lake County Public Schools, and the district worked diligently to change and create a state and national reputation for itself. The district's decade-long, constant series of changes includes a recent implementation of a new instructional software system which enables teacher-guided, student-led learning. The personalized, tech-infused learning environment is considered a threat to a small fraction of the community. A recent board election resulted in the election of two new board members to represent the dissatisfied stakeholders. Once employees of the district, both candidates vowed to bring back traditional teaching and learning practices. Board dynamics have since changed, and both superintendent and board chair are navigating the political climate to continue the innovative work. Superintendent Clark realizes the dynamics and addresses the concerns:

> And I know we can be 20th in the state again, but it requires a certain degree of gaming and playing the test prep game to get that score. And the learning environment will look very different than it does right now. We have kids that are actively engaged. We have kids that are doing job shadowing experiences, and we have kids that are building and creating things and solving real authentic problems. I think we've created an environment where kids are happy.

Board Chair Lowry also spoke to the situation, “Now that we’ve gone down that route our test scores are down, but we knew. We talked about it, and we knew that we might see that dip for a while. But then as time goes on, we expect them to come back up.”

In their May and June 2019 interviews, Ms. Lowry and Superintendent Clark both agreed that it was time to bring the board together, find a common balance, satisfy interest group concerns, and meet the needs of the students. Superintendent Clark states, "It's about [test] ranking versus what are we see kids are able to do today that they couldn't do five years ago." Bringing the new board members up to speed is a priority to Ms. Lowry, who states, "They've not been on the board long enough to grasp everything, but they have opinions about test scores. Our test scores aren't as good as they were." It is evident that Superintendent Clark doesn't put as much credence in test scores, as was the case ten years ago. He stated, "And it looked like we're doing a good job instructionally, but I think that what we're doing a good job with is playing the testing game." Despite the election of new board members and changes in a primarily 5-0 to a 3-2 voting pattern, the board offered Superintendent Clark a three-year contract at the end of May 2019. However, he resigned at the beginning of June 2019 and took a superintendent position in a neighboring district.

Theme 2: Rural Identity

Lake County is considered more of a remote town than a rural county and is as described by Ms. Lowry, highly political. Interviews with both the board chair and

superintendent mentioned the community and how politics affected change within the district rather than being about either rural geography or rural personal identity. Superintendent Clark was hired from outside the community but knew right away that his involvement and presence at many events were necessary to run the school district effectively. It is evident that he promoted the district's programs through community nights that allows students to showcase and communicate what they're learning to interested stakeholders. The remote location of Lake County creates a reliance on neighboring counties and cities for higher education and employment opportunities but also allows for closeness and personal connection among board members, LCPS faculty and staff, and the community.

Community.

Board Chair Carol Lowry introduced the school district at the beginning of the interview. "The district is about 2000 students, and all of our students are on one campus. Right here across the street. The community is a small community. We have a lot of … the school is our biggest employer." Other workers travel outside the county for work, while other citizens choose to retire in Lake County because of the scenery and water. Lowry shared that the community is a great place to live and is very supportive of the school system. When describing the students and their homelife she stated, "I would say like most communities anymore we have students who are living with one parent or living with grandparents who probably have a good population of students who are being raised by grandparents." Superintendent Joe Clark shared, "What's unique I think about that is, uh, the ability to build a community atmosphere. Uh all our staff pretty much

knows one another, and we know our students, and uh can really watch them progress through the system, right? And so that's exciting."

The Lake County community has a significant impact on the school system and is influential in the board's decision-making processes. Ms. Lowry states, "And I would say as a whole, the community is very supportive of the school system." The community expects high academic performance which often leads to deliberate decision-making processes resulting in academic expenditures over facility upgrades. "We are a small district. We have old buildings". Lowry shared her experiences with the board that had been together for nearly ten years. Although the board had recently replaced two board members, she reminisced about the solidarity of the previous board and the trust they had to make good decisions. Lowry stated that the board members being from the same small, rural community really made a difference:

> All of us were native Lake-Countians, and I really think that makes a difference too. You're so invested in your community because you've been here forever, and maybe that's the… in a rural community I think that is a very important factor and the other board member, the fifth board member, was not native to here, but she was from [nearby town] not far, and she lived here and raised her kids here. Lived here since a young adult. So she was very invested as well. Having that investment in the community, and you know wanting your community to be the best it can be, and we were very united.

Ms. Lowry later spoke to the benefits and challenges of living in a rural town and its effect serving as chair of the school board. She talked about how political the town was stating, “There’s some political undertones of who is the right person who's not that kinda thing. Not that I – that doesn't go anywhere with me, but some people are very, they buy into that, that's important to them. It doesn't matter to me who you are, it's what you can do.

Geography. Although a remote town, Lake County's proximity to area colleges and universities leads to many students to transition to higher education opportunities after high school graduation. Ms. Lowry said that a culture of academic excellence produces many graduates. "We do have … we've got somewhere in the 90% graduation rates, so you know we do graduate most of our students. We don't have a lot of dropouts." Ms. Lowry said many of these graduates go on to one of the area colleges or university options which are relatively close and explained, "We have a community college in [nearby town] we also have [regional state university] has a satellite in [nearby town]. Most of our students, if they do go to college, are going to [three nearby regional and state universities]."

Theme 3: Culture of Innovation

Lake County Public Schools' culture of innovation was designed to address community concerns about properly preparing students for 21st-century employment. Ten years ago, Lake County students tested among the top in the state, but for area employers, their compliant nature produced workers lacked the necessary soft skills. Further, college-bound students lacked deep mastery of the content. Superintendent Joe Clark stated the district required the students be "very compliant oriented, be able to do good on a test a paper-pencil test, which really wasn't equipping them with those 21st-century skills that were really important." With district experience in personnel and operations, Superintendent Joe Clark was hired to bring changes to the district's instructional programming. Together with a team of administrators, the superintendent led the district through changes to mirror those of nationally recognized districts. The district invested immense amounts of energy and resources into this new way of learning, which pleased

the board and community business leaders. The board chair Carole Lowry felt there was value in personalized and project-based learning, as well as teaching kids how to think and find information. Now that she's experienced a different style of teaching and learning, she doesn't want to revert back to the former ways of educating the students. "You know, teach them to be lifetime learners don't just teach them a test. You know I really don't want to see us going back to let's teach the test so we'll have great test scores."

The superintendent is adamant about not using the word *innovation*, and although he had no word to replace it, he didn't like using it. "Um but the word innovation from my perspective has a little bit of a, has acquired a bit of a fad-type thing attached to it and so we've tried to move away from that word as much as we possibly can." Innovation, however, is the most prevalent theme in data collected for the Lake County case study including interviews, web, state documents, and their District of Innovation (DOI) application. As mentioned previously, the district initially applied for the District of Innovation program in 2012 but was denied. Superintendent Clark stated the application was hastily written in a last-minute effort and made no mention of waivers requested for change. The next year, however, the district's 110-page application was more complete and subsequently approved. The DOI application described the district's proposed path to innovation, a goal which Superintendent Joe Clark believes they surpassed. "Basically it's [the application] around a competency model and continued to evolve. I think it's a (pause) …what we're doing now is better that…what was even written in this plan."

The district had an opportunity to reapply for District of Innovation status but is choosing not to. "You may not know … our application expires, our status expires June

30th, and we did not reapply for the status because quite frankly I don't know if we gained anything from that except that to write the plan, we had to think about what we wanted to do." The initial application included only certain grades because the primary school opted out, and focus is now on the district's five-year strategic plan. "Our district strategic plan, however, is really K12, right? This is what we want for our kids. This is what we want for our system. This is what we're pursuing. And a lot of things that are here are now written into our strategic plan, and we just really didn't need KDE specifically to designate us or …it really just didn't add value to what we were doing." Superintendent Clark offered his assessment of the Districts of Innovation application process, "So it [2012 application] was rejected because we didn't ask for any waivers which is kinda weird but whatever, right? In other words, the only way that you can innovate is to ask for a waiver [smirk]. I don't understand that but anyway…The real innovation is figuring out how to do it without getting any waiver (chuckle), in my opinion. Anyway…"

Administrator Preparation.

Superintendent Joe Clark shared his thoughts on innovation in the Lake County School District and his journey through leading, negotiating, preparing, and implementing highly political, organizational change. He expressed concern that he wished he'd taken or was offered academic courses to prepare him to lead such change. He stated that although there is first- and second-order change, he believes few administrators will ever engage in second-order change. He said that "The challenges and difficulties of second-order change…we're really trying to change mindsets and beliefs and shift the culture, [which] is extremely difficult and hard and grueling work, right?".

He continued by saying, “I don't feel like I ever had any class that ever talked to me about the intricacies of what second-order change felt like, right? and what was required, the perseverance that is required to get that.”

Superintendent Joe Clark has learned how to deal with organizational change through the support of his national peer network. "I will tell you that that's where that national network has been valuable to me to help me think about next steps and to push me beyond ya know uh where I'm at in my thinking." As he reflects on the nine-year process, he realizes the missteps and missed opportunities to celebrate change. "And I would tell you that that's one of the things I don't think we had in place strong enough. One of the ones that I think is here is research-based instructional practice" as well as the use of data and formative assessment. He also believes that the district did an inadequate job of collecting data and knowing how to use research-based instructional practices to plan good instruction. He concluded by saying, "I would tell you that there's going to be sometime spent re-focusing on some core foundational principles. Here to make sure that this can stand (he beats his knuckle on the desk for emphasis) the test of time."

Research.

Research was key to the development of the plan for Lake County's transformation. The superintendent, board members, and other administrators were heavily involved in activities such as site visits, state networking programs, and the creation of drafting the plan. The district wrote two vastly different DOI applications, and the board chair shared how the superintendent gathered ideas for the district's proposed change. Board Chair Carole Lowry stated, "I think he did the research and pulled the ideas from a lot of different places. He developed our graduate profile. They did a lot of

the development, but they did a lot of research. So I think that it's pulled from a lot of places and some of it may have been … and some of it may have been some of their own creation. A lot of research and visiting and reading."

Superintendent Clark confirmed the importance of researching and sharing details on the initial planning stages: "They [university program] were planning a school visit somewhere in Ohio, Reynoldsburg Ohio I believe to visit some schools. So I got to listen. I don't know if it was before they went or a debriefing, how that worked." He continued his research of other school districts, through interviewing his colleagues and reading books. He referenced a book that his team read as part of the university-sponsored program. "And the back of that book, if you have looked at that, there's some case studies, and one of those case studies was on High Tech High. And um in the spring of 2013, as we were winding down [the university program] I went to our board chair and ultimately to the board, and I asked them if we could send a team to visit that school."

Not all of the district's change efforts have been diligently researched, as was the case for the latest tech-infused learning program. Ms. Lowry discussed the implementation of a new program after a successful change process, "That sort of left a bad taste in some of the community's mouth because honestly, we launched it too quickly and we really weren't ready. That was the whole thing. We didn't do enough front end work on it, and so some teachers weren't ready." The implementation ultimately led to some subpar teaching practices, disgruntled parents, and the election of two new board members that contributed to a divided board. Despite the latest efforts, the superintendent is confident in the work that he has led. Superintendent Clark stated that if he were to have the opportunity to start innovation from the beginning in his district, he

would've built metrics of success to fully assess and communicate any progress or lack thereof with district stakeholders. Quantitative measures of success may be what the community stakeholder want to evaluate, but he sees the qualitative measures of success every day in the personal successes and transformation of his learning culture. "I think I think most people would tell you that our kids are better as a result of the work that we've done." He continued by admitting that the failure of creating quantitative measures of success was his mistake, and that he wished that he could start over so that the community could celebrate the success of their program. "I wish we had identified what the metrics were. That we were going to clearly measure from day one so that we could celebrate those over the test scores, right?"

Risk-taking.

Superintendent Clark spoke about the process of creating change within his district, experiences that were based upon educated risk-taking strategies, risks mitigated through the replication of ideas created in other districts. He spoke about his experience in a university-sponsored program saying, "And so when we went to that and had those learning experiences we came back and replicated them with a design team in the district that was comprised of teachers from every school." He again confirmed educated risk-taking by stating, "Every piece of (inaudible) that we had at [university program] we came back and replicated those experiences for that team within the district." The district built upon these ideas to then create a student assessment program, "So that's kinda … the design team kinda landed on … we started with project-based learning and decided to start training some people on project-based learning, and that evolved to creating a graduate profile."

Superintendent Joe Clark shared his thoughts on the politics of balancing community expectations and implementing district innovation. He spoke about the January 2019 school board election and the addition of two new board members. It was evident that this shift was a response to changes made in the district's learning program. "We've been 20th in the state in achievement. That is something that a lot of people were proud of even though we were playing in a test prep game. They were elected saying they were going to improve test scores." He then discussed the movement the new board is making to swing the instructional pendulum back to traditional methods. The board was considering the purchase of a new math curriculum in lieu of a math software. "I will tell you that will pass tonight [at the board meeting] …the allocation of the funds to buy that textbook for the middle school…because we've had that pushback and struggle in implementing [new software] that put kids on a computer. They [the community] don't want any part of that [new math software] right now." I interviewed the Board Chair Carole Lowry three weeks later, and she discussed the recent political climate after the latest technology implementation. She confirmed that indeed, that the board voted to purchase the textbooks the night of the board meeting. "We just recently voted to buy new math books. We were already talking about working on specific areas, but now I think that we're going to be more centered on [test] scores than we have been in a long time. So I don't know what that means for our DOI."

Both Superintendent Clark and Board Chair Lowry expressed interest in serving the needs of district students, while complying to the community's request to once again attain high test rankings in the state. The superintendent states:

> And so what I'm trying to figure out is how we get the pendulum in the center and can we work on testing enough, right? We can create the test prep so that we can

> do well enough on the test that they won't feel embarrassed by the score, which I think is ultimately what some of that is right? We were 20th in the state, and now we're not. It's about ranking versus what are…we see kids are able to do today that they couldn't do five years ago.

He concluded, "A K12 focus around student-centered mathematics. . . What does that look like? I mean because our vision is very much a student-centered vision. Empowering kids. Giving them rich, powerful, authentic, meaningful learning experiences, right? If that's what we believe, a textbook is not necessarily going to deliver on that."

Theme 4: Communication

Communication between the superintendent and the pre-January 2019 board election produced a level of trust that enabled and fostered a culture of innovation and change. However, the superintendent's communication patter with the new board members changed from January 2019 to the time of his interview in May 2019. "But I would say that the daily communication with the new board members is ongoing but its more about management kinds of things more than it is trying to learn about the innovative kind of work that we're doing." Superintendent Clark ensures communication is ongoing to keep the board apprised of the successes of their students. "We ask our schools to schedule exhibition nights on nights we have board meetings so our board can have part of their meeting, recess, and then experience exhibition nights with our students. So we constantly, I'm constantly keeping that in front of them." School Board Chair Carole Lowry appreciates the superintendent's communication style, "That to me, he's very passionate about things, and that's how he gets other people passionate about things. He says let's go look at this. And they see how well the students are doing and how the students like to be at school." Serving as the community's leading representative in education, communication is the main priority for Board Chair Carole Lowry:

> If we can teach them how to be lifetime learners and how to communicate better and how to be more civic-minded, we do a lot of projects where they do civic type projects and learning to give back to the community kinda thing. That to me is so much more important than “Ok, we beat 100 other school districts.”

Trust.

School Board Chair Lowry and I talked about the organizational change process and how the board and Superintendent Clark worked together to make the change happen. In talking about the superintendent garnering district support for innovation, she said: "He really didn't force anybody to make these large changes unless they were ready. And then at some point, you just have to say this is the direction we're going, and you can either come along, or maybe you need to go somewhere else." Although she believes that he never really got to that point, she confided, "I think he was still trying to get everybody to come along."

Ms. Lowy ensures that communication among school board members is productive and respectful during board meetings. She stated that many times the board members contact the superintendent or finance director directly with possible questions they may have, which requires each member to prepare for their monthly meetings and work sessions. She commented that, "If we've got additional questions, we come to the board meeting prepared. I think that's really important too … that board members and I preach that all the time … make sure you read your agenda make sure you ask your questions ahead of time because the worst thing that a board member can do is come in here and ask questions and you haven't given the superintendent or the finance officer or whoever the opportunity to do research before the meeting. It's not fair."

District work sessions aren’t always about facts, figures, and votes, they also include continued education and the sharing of ideas. Ms. Lowry appreciates how

Superintendent Clark shares knowledge with district leaders, the board, and his district leaders. "One of the things Superintendent Clark did was that he was continually saying 'Read this book.' 'This is some really interesting information. We'll sit here and talk about it.' He did that with his cabinet, his principals, he did that often with them. They'll just do book studies." Superintendent also uses work sessions as a way to educate the board on the results of innovation. In the board room, "We sat in a circle basically and just talked about the work that they [K-1 teachers] were doing, educating our board on that and gave them the option to ask questions and more deeply explore that model."

The superintendent schedules Exhibition Nights on board meetings and uses the opportunity for school board members, the superintendent, teachers, principals, students, parents, and the community to connect. "We had a lot of positive feedback from that, from the community. The community has been, we've given them more opportunities to see what their students are doing for one thing, but they're also seeing what the students are learning from these projects and that they're able to articulate it and answer questions and that's been a real positive for the community. So we've heard positive feedback about that." In sum, verbal, non-verbal, written and implied communication (including social media) has been vitally important to the building a culture of innovation. The data doesn't provide evidence of the communication between the superintendent and stakeholders whose board members represent those with an interest in traditional instruction.

Networking.

Superintendent Clark spoke at length about the power of networking to his innovative organizational change cause. The network includes state and national school district leaders, leaders and members of educational organizations, and colleges and

universities. “I would tell you that ya know I have searched and researched for ideas and people that can add value to our, can push our support, our help, give direction to me um as the leader of this district. And so my network has become a national network of people that I interact with.” Further explaining his change efforts to fill in gaps in his change management schema, Clark states, “I will tell you that that’s where that national network has been valuable to me to help me think about next steps and to push me beyond ya know uh where I’m at in my thinking.”

Clark named many people with whom he works to deepen his knowledge of innovation in education, change management, and instructional best practices. “Over and during the last five years. Formed a relationship with Cecil Warren and the Institute for Personalized Learning out of Wisconsin.” Lake County hosted the event, and the organization facilitated a leadership design academy in July 2019 for Lake County and many area school districts. He talked about other organizations of which he has a connection for personal continuing education purposes:

> I have, through the CCSO, participation in some of the Innovation Lab Network. The NATIONAL Lab Network. Met some individuals that I do a call about every eight weeks. We do a conference call together that kind of connected and continued to interact with one another. And we just share ideas and thinking, and it's a place where you can ask questions with them. So we do that little call once every 6-8 weeks. And then there is the deeper learning leadership forum that I participate in over a two-year period. I was in the second cohort because of that experience. I actually…Envision Learning Partners actually ran that, so we developed a relationship with them and they continue to partner with us here in Lake County to help us figure out very specifically performance assessment around our graduate profile which we continue to try to grow over the past couple of years. So they've been a tremendous partner for us. But I will tell you now that there are so many in Kentucky that are interested in the work that their cohort of the DLLF is actually happening in the Ohio Valley region because there are five Kentucky members now in this cohort, in cohort three, of the national network.

School Board Chair Lowry spoke to Superintendent Clark engaging district stakeholders throughout the change process saying, "I think that anything that Clark has presented to the board and has asked for support, everything he's researched, and he's taken people to see schools that are already using…that's really important to him. To take staff that's interested and let them see what really, what's working in other districts. And that's been really important to him."

Summary

This chapter presented findings of data collected in a multiple-case study guided by two questions focusing on the characteristics of superintendents and their relationships with school district board of directors in change contexts. Analyzing data collected through interviews, documents, and web information revealed four themes: student preparation, rural identity, community, and communication emerged. Stating that traditional instructional methods are insufficient in preparing their students, these rural school superintendents embarked in innovative organizational change primarily focused on preparing their students for college and career opportunities of the 21st century. District school boards hired each of the superintendents to drive change and have built trusted relationships through common vision, clear communication, and managerial expertise. These district leaders leverage the tight bond often found within small, remote towns to build consensus and ultimately transform the district. Further, rural superintendents prepare and find professional support for these substantial change efforts through regional and national networks, searching for ideas for new learning systems that fit the needs of their community. Chapter 5 provides a cross-case analysis and reviews findings of student preparation, rural identity, community, and communication. The

chapter concludes by offering suggestions for future research in innovative rural education leadership in political contexts.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to understand the characteristics of rural district school superintendents who lead purposeful systemic change and the executive decision-making processes and relationships they have with their school district board members. These school districts were deemed *innovative* based on their approval to participate in the Districts of Innovation (DOI) program designed by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE). This program highlights districts that changed their learning environments to move students into the future and who focused their innovative work on improving students' college and career preparedness (Kentucky District of Innovation Application, 2013).

Qualitative case study, the most effective strategy to evaluate bonded programs or groups set within specific boundaries, served as the methodology for this exploratory study (Creswell, 2013). Case studies allow for the evaluation of real-life situations and phenomena, deepen understanding, and provide possible links among studies subjects (Flick, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2002). These three DOIs are bound together by person, time, place, and program for the purpose of this study. Each rural district chosen for the study had a superintendent who was active at both the time of the DOI designation between 2013-2016 and the time of the study interview. Individual interviews with the district superintendents and board members were conducted on six different occasions. Study participants answered interview questions focusing on the relationships that superintendents have with their district school board members and their decision-making processes in innovation contexts.

This chapter presents key study findings reported in Chapter 4, themes that emerged from the collected data, and summarizes answers to each research question. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. Are there common characteristics among superintendents within rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)?
2. Are there similarities in the relationships between board members and their superintendents in rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)?

The research questions were used to construct a framework to identify characteristics and relationships among the case study participants. Relevant literature is used to explain findings and situate them in the extant knowledge base. Answers to each research question may include several subheadings as findings are complex and often interwoven.

A cross-case analysis will be presented prior to answering the two research questions and will include several sections: student preparation, rural identity, culture of innovation, and communication. These themes helped to illuminate the relationships and decision-making processes of rural superintendents and their school district board members (Table 4.1). Several sub-themes will also be discussed in this chapter as they are pertinent to the analysis and answering the research questions posed for this study. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for practice and future research.

Table 4.1: District of Innovation Cross-Case Analysis

Emerging theme	Appalachian County	Central County	Lake County
Student preparation	Primary reason for district change. Requested DOI waivers for online learning and graduation time; college and career focused.	Primary reason for district change. Requested DOI waivers to create virtual instructional environment and coop/career opportunities.	Primary reason for district change. Requested DOI waiver for student assessment to reflect student PBL performance.
Rural identity	Board members and superintendent native to county. Challenges and advantages expressed in multiple data sources: location, revenue, employment.	Board members and superintendent native to county. Small class size, close relationships, small operating budget, recruitment.	Board members native to county, but superintendent is not. Highly political community affects innovative change decisions.
Culture of innovation	Board hired superintendent specifically to create change in school district. Superintendent innate problem-solver. Innovation ongoing, created by the superintendent and supported by the board of education.	Board hired superintendent specifically to create change in school district. Superintendent creative problem-solver. Research key instrument to change efforts. District supports educated risk-taking.	Board hired superintendent specifically to create change in school district. District team networked through state, region, and national organizations; incorporated best practices into district plan.
Communication	Priority in hiring of superintendent. Used to build trust, essential element in the change process. Network assisted in change efforts and learn from peer colleagues and districts. District sports venue for communication. Used to foster trust among superintendent and board members.	Priority in hiring of superintendent. Used to foster trust among superintendent and board members. Superintendent leads school district using consistent, respectful, professional communication style. Superintendent networks to connect and collaborate with colleagues.	Used to foster trust: superintendent and board members, educate new board members. Promote district initiatives to community and sustain innovative change. Superin-tendent communicates with national peer network to gain ideas and support.

Student Preparation.

Rural school superintendents within each of the cases embarked in innovative organizational change, stating that traditional instructional methods were insufficient in preparing their students. Student preparation meant different things to each district - life preparation, enriched learning experiences, or the opportunity for quality instruction despite geographic and cultural boundaries. District school boards similarly hired each of the superintendents to drive change and have created trusted relationships built on a common vision, clear communication, and managerial expertise. Both superintendents and board members in each respective school district remarked on the unique pressures that rural districts face in preparing students for environments they currently do not experience such as (a) experiencing employed adults in the home, (b) daily access to brick-and-mortar post-secondary environments, and (c) access to multiple high school co-op opportunities. Each study participant cited examples of decision-making efforts to support students and provide them with the best instructional opportunity despite budget and personnel constraints. Student preparation examples are evidenced in interview data, each of the three DOI applications, on district websites, and in other data.

Rural identity.

The notion of a rural identity theme is evidenced in all three case studies and mentioned 69 times in participant interviews. Although a majority of study participants acknowledged rural advantages of their respective school districts, an overwhelming number candidly communicated the communities' challenges that rural districts face. It is evident that tight bonds are often found within small, remote communities that may be leveraged to build consensus and transform school districts. The local school board of

each of the districts included in this study was comprised of individuals who were native to the county, and most knew each other on a personal level. The level of belonging and familiarity notably assisted in the decision-making process. Rural geography, proximity to jobs, recruitment, and retention of district personnel, and economic development were common concerns expressed by these participants. Geographic location affected the intensity of rural identity and was evidenced in interview data. The cases' proximity to local universities and colleges may have had impact on the community's expectation of the district's college preparation program, but that subject was not fully explored in this study.

Culture of Innovation.

Superintendents in each district stated that district innovation occurred as a solution to mandated, state-level standardized assessments. Further, all superintendents stated that test scores were an inadequate measure of what is required of P12 graduates in the 21st century. Superintendents led highly effective change efforts without formal training in innovation or change management strategies. Rather, they seemingly relied on an innate sense of what may work based on their own experience or learning from a network of peers in other districts, both within the state, and nationally. Superintendents and school board members introduced, implemented, and sustained district change built on a trusting, professional relationship with their respective superintendents as well as used educated risk-taking based on their extensive research. Although the reason for change was similar, the cases innovation change efforts, research processes, and implementation strategies were different. In two cases, innovation strategies were organically grown through the superintendents' need to solve for district inadequacies,

whereas the third case's change strategy included the retrofitting of numerous ideas implemented by other districts. Despite their differences, superintendents and board members in all cases created cultures of innovation, remained purposefully open to change, and created district systems that supported and encouraged educated risk-taking.

Communication.

Communication is an essential element of fostering openness and trust among stakeholders. Sharing ideas and information and creating environments of innovation and change were consistent and prominent themes in all three case studies. It is evident that communication among superintendents and school district boards contributed to the successful implementation of substantial changes within their respective school districts. They enacted their roles in a demonstratively professional and trustworthy manner that was central to their success. Frequency and type of communication varied from district to district; however, each superintendent adjusted his communication style to best serve their respective school board members and was responsive to any board member request for information about district affairs. Further, the superintendents communicated effectively within their school district organizations as well as among community citizens. In these instances, they also used a variety of techniques that were appropriate for sensing stakeholder needs. The following sections will address how the findings within- and cross-cases analyses answer the research questions. Although common themes emerged from these cases, each case presented different subthemes which reflected unique characteristics of each district.

Question 1

The first research question sought to explore and understand the characteristics of superintendents in innovative rural districts: "Are there common characteristics among superintendents within rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)?" Despite their different geography, every district's remote location presented common challenges. The school districts' superintendents crafted visions of learning environments that broke down physical barriers and solved many student challenges through the use of technology, incorporation of new ideas, as well as creation of new learning systems. These leaders appreciated the uniqueness of their communities, bonded with key stakeholders, and communicated their plan for education's future (Zaccaro, 2007). These superintendents built capacity in others including students, teachers, principals, and central office staff, to carry out the new vision (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). They also strategically shared early adopters' successes to build confidence in the plan for continued change (Choo, 2006). Data provide evidence of similar superintendent characteristics such as their drive toward proper student preparation, belief in the power of rural identity, ability to create cultures of innovation, and proficient communication skills.

Student Preparation.

Superintendents in innovative school districts share a personal drive to prepare students for life beyond the school district, which is the most prevalent theme of the study. Realizing that the current system of education failed in its efforts to prepare students for college and career, each leader created a new system. The reasons varied for wanting change, but every superintendent reflected on their personal experiences and

how that significantly affected their desire to change instructional programs in the district. Shavinina (2011) explains that a leader's *schema,* or cognitive understanding built through personal experience, influences their capacity to create innovative organizations. Innovative leaders leverage their psychological and comprehensive understandings as instruments for transformation. The leaders in this study desired continuous district improvement, although their approaches to sustaining the innovative programs differed. One superintendent used a strategic approach to district innovation, involving district and community stakeholders and building consensus over time (Blase & Blase, 2000); one used a methodical approach, building upon a foundation, gaining trust, and expanding the program reach to meet the growing needs of students (Fullan, 2001); and one superintendent simultaneously layered innovative programs borrowed from outstanding districts in an effort to amass results to promote student engagement. Each commented on their ambitious timelines, chuckling at their initial program completion goal versus the actual implementation timeline that took years longer than each had wanted.

Rural Identity.

Rural identity was undeniable among the superintendents who chose to lead the county whose environment, schools, and community had greatly influenced their person. Distinct differences exist between the two types of superintendents in this exploratory study: two who had gone back to the rural county of their birth and one who was an "outsider" superintendent. Although the third superintendent was born and raised in the region, he spoke of his district with great respect but never with such deep understanding and reverence of the community, the population, and the geography as the other two

leaders. The native-born superintendents shared a personal calling to solve issues that they had grown up with themselves. Their solutions for such challenges seemed innately created.

All three superintendents seemed connected to a network of innovative leaders who validated their work and shared similar success stories beyond the boundaries of their rural locations. Each leader realized their challenges, including small budgets, geographic locations, recruitment and retention of faculty and staff, and a community that did not appreciate educating the 21st-century student. Each superintendent embodied the grit and determination to continuously create and promote a new vision of education in their county. Consistent with Burke and Barron (2014) and Shavinina (2011), these transformational leaders fully understood their followers' beliefs and values and used their energy, power, and commitment to the mission to induce change.

Culture of Innovation.

Superintendents from all three districts exemplified leadership qualities to foster cultures of innovation. These district leaders led such cultures by encouraging risk-taking, new ideas, ownership, and trust. To solve the challenges that their districts faced, the superintendents spoke of their continued research efforts to stay apprised of new ideas and stay current in the literature. They shared a spirit of lifelong learning and empowered their students, faculty, staff, and board to be curious and learn beyond traditional systems. Each superintendent connected with their community in different ways to introduce new ideas or share the results of change efforts. Fullan and Edwards (2017) support this finding by emphasizing the importance of empowering people within an organization to create cultures of change. Likewise Holman, Devane, and Cady (2007) state innovative

leaders encourage risk-taking and the sharing of knowledge as part of meaningful organizational transformation.

Communication.

Superintendents in this study believed in the power of clearly communicating with key stakeholders, although the reasons varied among study participants: fulfilling board requests, meeting community expectations, building trust, advocating for district concerns, or promoting new ideas. One superintendent leveraged social media to increase the perceived value of education within the community, and another used special events to communicate the value of innovative programs to the community (Choo, 2006). Each superintendent expressed their innate understanding of the importance of connecting with people to better their work environment and their professional craft, and to move an agenda (Kowalski, 2016). The superintendents realized the importance of communication in the preparation of, during, and after the program transition, and created and maintained communication plans for addressing all key stakeholders. Further, superintendents realized the power of communication for building trust with their boards of education, which is essential in change contexts (Blase & Bjork, 2010). These occurrences are consistent with Blase and Blase (2000), who stated that a political culture that includes formal and informal power distribution is the central mechanism for reform.

These innovative superintendents created local, regional, and national networks of colleagues to collaborate, communicate, find support, and share ideas; this is concurrent with Leonard-Barton (1995), who states that innovative organizations recognize the need to seek external expertise. One superintendent stated that his network was his primary source for learning change management processes. Further, superintendents in this study

connected with the community and promoted or found resources to support new instructional projects. Networking in these rural communities occurred in places such as sporting events, churches, grocery stores, and other informal spaces. These school boards formally and community stakeholders informally expected constant communication within these spaces.

Question 2

The second research question focused on the relationships between superintendents and board members of innovative rural school districts: Are there similarities in the relationships between board members and their superintendents in rural school districts designated by the Kentucky Department of Education as Districts of Innovation (DOI)? Research provides a direct correlation between superintendent and school board relationships and student performance (Delagardelle, 2006). This study sought to explore any possible impact that this relationship would have on innovation in rural school districts. An examination of this study's data shows that systemic change was achieved in these three cases when the superintendent fully communicated with the board, district stakeholders, and community members, and created cultures that embraced continued learning and educated risk-taking (Eisenbach, Watson & Pillai, 1999). School district change occurred when boards hired superintendents to lead change and then supported those change efforts (Burpitt & Bigoness, 1997). Moreover, district transformation occurred when the superintendent-board member relationship was trustworthy, open, and respectful (Burke & Barron, 2014; Shavinina, 2011).

Student Preparation.

Each school district board of education hired their respective superintendents to create purposeful, systemic change within the school district. This finding is consistent with Fullan (2007), who states that school boards significantly affect change efforts through the hiring and firing of superintendents who lead or prevent change. Whether leading a high- or low-performing school district, school board members in his study stated that the former system of education inadequately prepared their students for life. These school board members spoke about state testing, student performance, and its misrepresentation of how students would perform 21st-century college and career opportunities. Although each district's changes (as described by the District of Innovation application) were quite different, each board supported the superintendent in the time of transition. Conversely, each superintendent spoke of the board's positive voting record supporting the resource allocation necessary to create change. The board members spoke about helping the superintendent manage stakeholder relationships, primarily around changing the community's mindset on the value of education. Board members worked with stakeholders in the district, in the community, and area businesses and other organizations, and were able to assist with communication, planning, and day-to-day district efforts that focused on preparing students for their college and career experiences. Supporting these findings, Blase and Björk (2010) state that decision-making processes in highly political educational environments involve both conflictual and cooperative activities among many interest groups at both macropolitical and micropolitical levels.

Rural Identity.

The theme of rural identity was evident in every study participant's interview; however, each board member spoke more to the rural identity of the district than did their respective superintendent. As representatives for their community, the board members addressed the challenges of leading rural districts. Interestingly, unlike the superintendents, every board member also addressed the advantages of education in a rural district. One board member addressed the privilege of having small class sizes and tight student culture. Another spoke to her surprise and pride about her district's innovation being beyond that of larger, more affluent districts she had visited. Each addressed the advantages of working with other board members whom they'd known personally, sometimes since childhood. The board members resoundingly shared their vision for their district and spoke of wanting to push their district to be the best it could be despite the challenges. Fullan and Edwards (2017) state that this shared understanding of an organization's mission is an essential element of change leadership. As members during the time of the Districts of Innovation application through the duration of the district's innovation implementation, the study participants expressed their strong support toward the superintendent and the mission to create a new school. The board's support was earned in waves: through trust gained initially in natively local candidates or ones that understood the region; through the hiring process in which the board asked the superintendent to change the district; through effective communication and constant activity within the community; and through the experience of effective change effort implementation that resulted in positive student outcomes.

Culture of Innovation.

Both superintendents and board members in this study recognized that the district's former system of education had to change, and with change comes inherent risk. Participating board members and superintendents responded to interview questions regarding their decision-making process, and the emerging element among the parties was trust. Trust between the superintendents and their boards derived from: clear and constant communication between superintendent, board, and community; positive results stemming from experience; research-based changes; thorough planning and execution of the innovation plans; and positive results. To ensure successful change, superintendents led their teams and created cultures that encouraged risk-taking. (The risk-taking theme was mentioned 39 times in interview transcripts). These cultures allowed for students, teachers, building-level leaders, and central office staff the flexibility to design new instructional programs (with justification), while ensuring there would be no punitive repercussions should something go wrong.

Risk-taking activities supported by research were more widely accepted, and all stakeholders were methodically involved with the innovative decisions. Evidence in one instance showed that when interest groups felt isolated or ill-informed, they thwarted change efforts. Despite rumblings among the community, board members continued to support the superintendent in the change-decision fully. However, notable differences emerged in interview data regarding the culture of innovation; poorer performing districts were more willing to engage in risk-taking activities more so than the higher-performing district. In spite of those differences, the interviewed board members of the innovative districts respected and supported their respective superintendents. Positive relationships

built on mutual values (Kowalski, 2016) as well as mutually supportive relationships (Norton, Webb, Dlugosh & Sybouts, 1996; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Bader, 2004) have positive effects on district functionality (Kowalski, 1993), especially in reform efforts (Blase & Björk, 2010).

Communication.

This study's board members expect their rural superintendents to communicate effectively to the community as representatives of the county's largest employer. Communication between a superintendent and the board is key to maintaining positive relationships, as was the case for all three study participants. Moreover, communication was a key priority for the hiring of two superintendents, as their respective board members stated that their previous superintendents were not good communicators, and that affected the relationships among the parties. Board members mentioned how they valued clear, concise, relevant, and constant information; expected superintendents to funnel communication respectfully and non-authoritatively through the board and to the community via mail, email, text, phone call, or personal attendance; and use information and ideas presented to them to make decisions about possible school district changes, to name a few. Organizations committed to sustainable growth recognize the value of information (Chapman, Soosay, & Kandampully, 2002), methodically collect and disseminate information (Milway and Saxton, 2011), and use the information for organizational planning and learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Implications for Practice

The superintendents who participated in this study were candid and shared their process for learning about organizational change management, politics, and innovation.

Each described their learning about organizational change, including the programs, strategies, and tactics they used to manage the change process. Board members shared their hiring practices for innovative superintendents, the support they provided in innovative contexts, and features of the relationships they had with their superintendents to support innovative learning. Findings from this research study suggest several implications for practice. First, creating and offering research-based courses and professional development programs focused on innovation, change management and politics to enhance building- and district-level leaders. Secondly, preparing aspiring and new district superintendents in the areas of education innovation and education politics through formalized mentoring and virtual, online learning programs. Thirdly, providing continued professional development opportunities for superintendents and board members that address change management, communications, innovation, resource allocation, and politics in education. Finally, as part of their ongoing continuing education, educating boards of education on current innovative best practices to learn how to support superintendents who want to make changes within their districts.

Recommendations for Future Studies

Throughout this exploratory study, I recorded my thoughts in a journal and identified numerous opportunities for future research studies on innovation that were informed by data, insights gained through interaction with study participants, and gaps in the literature. First, recommendations for future studies may include the understanding of how local board member backgrounds and career trajectories affect communication, trust, and respect in school board decision-making processes may make a significant contribution to the literature. In this study, at least one educator or former educator

presided as a board member and was responsible for translating education language and program meaning to other members in board discussions. Additionally, business owners and accountants in these cases were considered experts in monetary discussions and had an impact on local school board decisions. Secondly, research may examine the tenure of local school board members and how it may affect the decision-making process of the school board, especially regarding change and innovation. In the three districts included in the study, newer members generally deferred to more experienced members on certain matters, and in others, newer members disrupted progress with their own agenda. Thirdly, future researchers can interview all members of the local school boards in the context of a similar study. Study participants served as board chairs or a long-serving member of the board, both expressing support for their respective superintendent. Interviewing all board members may provide a different perspective. Fourthly, future research studies may focus on the personal histories of innovative superintendents, and how their hobbies may influence their decision-making processes (Shavinina, 2003). The extant literature suggests that there is a strong correlation between the hobbies and histories of CEOs and their propensity to innovate. Fifthly, researchers may seek to understand how community citizens and area business influence decision-making processes in school districts of innovation (DOI). Sixthly, future researchers may consider developing a qualitative codebook that may support the work of scholars conducting similar studies in other states (Braun et al., 2018). Finally, researcher may replicate studies of leadership and innovation in business within the education space. Examples of possible studies may include: leadership style and its effect on organizational innovation (Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003); the cognitive situation of creative leaders in education (Mumford, Connelly, &

Gaddis, 2003), or how leaders behavior affects followers' creativity (Jaussi & Dionne, 2003).

Conclusions

This study examined the characteristics of innovative rural school district superintendents and the relationships they have with the school district board members in these unique change contexts. In retrospect, sequential waves of education reform, introduction of new education standards, and infusion of technology into P20 education were catalysts for such change. The superintendents in this study who lead change and foster innovation in school districts strongly believe in preparing students for their version of post-P12 life, whether college or career, and acknowledge state testing does not adequately measure the preparation for either opportunity. They are proficient communicators within their communities, first and foremost with their boards of education, and use communication to build trust, network, share their innovative vision, and garner support from community stakeholders. While facing challenges such as shrinking enrollments, small budgets, and community pushback, these leaders leverage the power of their rural communities to expedite the change process by being present, communicating effectively, and bringing value to its students.

School boards have a profound influence on innovation efforts through direct support of district leaders, resource-allocation decisions, and openness to experimentation. The relationship that school board members have with their superintendents affects change efforts, as shown in the relationships of the cases studied. Relationships built upon effective communication and superintendent experience fostered trust, resulting in non-contentious decision-making processes. The opportunity to

replicate such innovative contexts through research-based training and continued professional development should be available for school district leaders. Meanwhile, education leaders would be well-served to explore business innovation literature for examples of innovative change processes and explore innovative instructional options through regional and national networks.

APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of Kentucky | Office of Research Integrity
IRB, RDRC

XP Initial Review

Approval Ends:	IRB Number:
5/12/2020	48334

TO: Catherine Nunn,

PI phone #: 859-619-3920

PI email: catherine.nunn@uky.edu

FROM: Chairperson/Vice Chairperson
Non Medical Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol

DATE: 5/14/2019

On 5/13/2019, the Non Medical Institutional Review Board approved your protocol entitled:

SUPERINTENDENTS AND THE MICROPOLITICS OF INNOVATIVE SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN RURAL KENTUCKY

Approval is effective from 5/13/2019 until 5/12/2020 and extends to any consent/assent form, cover letter, and/or phone script. If applicable, the IRB approved consent/assent document(s) to be used when enrolling subjects can be found in the "All Attachments" menu item of your E-IRB application. [Note, subjects can only be enrolled using consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp unless special waiver has been obtained from the IRB.] Prior to the end of this period, you will be sent a Continuation Review (CR)/Administrative Annual Review (AAR) request which must be completed and submitted to the Office of Research Integrity so that the protocol can be reviewed and approved for the next period.

In implementing the research activities, you are responsible for complying with IRB decisions, conditions and requirements. The research procedures should be implemented as approved in the IRB protocol. It is the principal investigator's responsibility to ensure any changes planned for the research are submitted for review and approval by the IRB prior to implementation. Protocol changes made without prior IRB approval to eliminate apparent hazards to the subject(s) should be reported in writing immediately to the IRB. Furthermore, discontinuing a study or completion of a study is considered a change in the protocol's status and therefore the IRB should be promptly notified in writing.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" available in the online Office of Research Integrity's IRB Survival Handbook. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI's web site. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428.

Section 1 Page 1 of 1

APPENDIX B

Combined Consent and Authorization to Participate in a Research Study

SUPERINTENDENTS AND THE MICROPOLITICS OF INNOVATION IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

We are inviting you to take part in a research study about the role superintendents and boards of education play in designing and supporting innovation within rural school districts. You are being invited to take part in this research because of your leadership in guiding your district to achieving a Kentucky District of Innovation status. If you choose to volunteer for this study, you will be one of six study participants.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE, PROCEDURE, AND DURATION OF THIS STUDY?

By doing this study, we are trying to understand how superintendents and boards work together to institute and sustain substantial change within school districts. We hope to learn how superintendents create the ideas and build capacity for change. We want to determine the decision-making processes of boards and superintendents in change contexts. If you enroll in the study, you will participate in 1-hour interview. Interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed for the purposes of this study. The researcher will lead the interview.

WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

Your participation in this study may not directly benefit you. However, by participating you will be helping us better understand how superintendents and board members affect innovation within school districts.

WHAT ARE REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE NOT TO VOLUNTEER FOR THIS STUDY?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life. Other than personal choice, there are no reasons why you should not take part in this study.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any services, benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

The person in charge of this study is Catherine Nunn Lawless, principal investigator and doctoral candidate at the University of Kentucky, Department of Educational Leadership Studies. If you have questions, suggestions, or concerns about this study, her contact information is 859.619.3920 or catherine.nunn@uky.edu.

If you have any questions, suggestions or concerns about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact staff in the University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Monday-Friday at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428.

_____	_____
Signature of person agreeing to participate in study	Date
_____	_____
Printed name of person agreeing to participate in study	Date
_____	_____
Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent	Date

Person providing information about the study:

Catherine Nunn Lawless
Principal Investigator
University of Kentucky
Phone: 859-619-3920
Email: catherine.nunn@uky.edu

From: https://www.research.uky.edu/uploads/ori-nonmedical-testing-and-survey-key-information-sample-pdf

APPENDIX C

SUPERINTENDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

1. I'd like to know about your passion for education. How did you come into education as a profession?
    a. Tell me about your education as a child, teenager, and possibly beyond.
    a. Who impacted you most? What did they teach?
    b. Did you teach? What was your path into administration?
2. Tell me about your district. Describe the culture of your district when you first took your job as superintendent.
    a. How has that changed during your tenure?
    b. How did you know the time was right for change in your district? Did you take specific steps to ensure that your district was ready for change? Did you know that your culture was ready to adapt?
    c. Explain the relationship that you have with your board. Did they hire you for a specific purpose? Does your relationship create opportunity for change in your district, or not? Please explain.
3. Can you briefly explain the innovation for which your district was chosen as a District of Innovation?
    a. How long had you been superintendent when you began to implement your vision?
    b. Did you create the innovative idea yourself or attain the idea from another district, state, education conglomerate, or company?

c. Did you have any sort of formal training in order to implement your idea? OR How did you know the process for implementing the idea?
d. How long did the implementation of the idea take? Is it ongoing or have you shifted focuses since that time?
e. Who are considered some of the most important people on your team to ensure that the innovation was implemented successfully? Did they receive formal training or how did you communicate your idea to be implemented successfully?
f. How long had the innovation been in place before you applied to be a District of Innovation?

4. What impact has this innovation had upon the district?
5. [Open-ended] How has this innovation impacted your students? The teachers? Principals? The community?
6. What compelled you to bring about this change to your district? [Open-ended] What issues were you solving for?
7. Tell me about the change of resource distribution, and the process for making these changes happen. [Open-ended] Can you explain further?
8. What were the steps needed to garner board support? [Open-ended] Tell me more about how you worked with your board chair before/during/after this process.
9. Did you have the resources necessary to implement the innovation long-term? People? Money? Time? [Open-ended] Tell me more about the sustainability of your innovation as stated in your application.

APPENDIX D

BOARD CHAIR INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

2. I'd like to know about your passion for education. Where did your interest in education begin?
    a. Tell me about your education as a child, teenager, and possibly beyond.
    b. Who impacted you most? What did they teach?
    c. Tell me more about your career.
    d. What is your idea of innovation in your work?
3. Tell me about your district, your community, your students.
4. Do you believe that schools in general are properly preparing their students for the future? What about the students in your district?
5. Were you on the board before your superintendent was hired? Was your board searching for a specific type of leaders to guide your district to present-day? [Open-ended] Please describe the relationship between your superintendent and the board and what affect you think it has on your district. [Open-ended]
6. Describe the learning culture before the superintendent arrived. [Open-ended]
7. Have changes occurred during the superintendent's tenure?
    a. Can you describe the process of these changes?
    b. Do you feel as though your board has played an active role in these changes?
    c. Can you provide examples of how you've supported? What choices you've made? How they've affected the schools?

8. Can you briefly explain the innovation for which your district was chosen as a District of Innovation?
    a. Did the innovative idea come from your board or from the superintendent?
    b. Did you create the innovative idea yourself or attain the idea from another district, state, education conglomerate, or company?
    c. Who are considered some of the most important people in the district that has ensured the innovation was implemented successfully? Did they receive formal training or how did you communicate your idea to be implemented successfully?
9. What impact has this innovation had upon the district?
10. [Open-ended] How has this innovation impacted your students? The teachers? Principals? The community?
11. What compelled you to bring about this change to your district? [Open-ended] What issues were you solving for?
12. Tell me about the change of resource distribution, and the process for making these changes happen. [Open-ended] Can you explain further?
13. Did you have the resources necessary to implement the innovation long-term? People? Money? Time? [Open-ended] What did you have to do to support the vision and mission of this innovative approach to teaching and learning?

APPENDIX E

RECRUITMENT LETTER

SUPERINTENDENTS AND THE MICROPOLITICS OF INNOVATION IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Superintendent [Last Name]:

Today's education system is filled with regulations, assessments, and paperwork that may squelch innovative teaching and learning, but you have led your district to special innovative circumstances. I believe that education leadership researchers can learn so much from you, and would be grateful for the opportunity to interview you for my doctoral studies.

Participation in the research will remain confidential, thus your name and other identifying information will not be included in the report. Attached you will find a consent form concerning the interview phase of the research. Please read through the consent form and ask any questions, or concerns. As principal investigator, I can be reached at the phone or email included.

The interview, which will be digitally taped, will be a face-to-face interview of one-hour scheduled at your convenience. The interview will allow you to share your experiences as superintendent and as an educator, share information about your district, your board, and the decisions you've made to create a culture of innovation.

Would you or your administrative assistant contact me to schedule an interview? You may contact me via telephone at 859-619-3920 or email Catherine.nunn@uky.edu. Feel free to also contact me with any questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study.

Thank you for your participation. I look forward to your interview.

Catherine Nunn Lawless
Principal Investigator
Doctoral Student, Department of Educational Leadership Studies University of Kentucky

APPENDIX F

KENTUCKY DISTRICTS OF INNOVATION

Kentucky Districts of Innovation

District	Enrollment	Type	Innovation	Waivers Requested
Jefferson County Public Schools (2013)	99,812	Urban	Teacher collaboration model, create equal access to highly effective instruction	KRS 160.346, 704 KAR 3:390, 703 KAR 5:240, 16 KAR 1:050,
			Extending learning opportunities for students (intra-web, community)	KRS 156.070, KRS 150:060, 702 KAR 7:140,
			Creating Schools of Innovation	KRS 156.070, KRS 169.010, 702 KAR 7:125,
			Create student support system (resiliency)	KRS 158.160, 704 KAR 3:305, KRS 161.020, 16 KAR 1:010
Danville Independent (2013)	1,924	Town, Distant	Danville Diploma: College and Career Readiness - modified state accountability	KRS 158.6453; 703 KAR 4:060; 703 KAR 5:225
			Accelerated Core Courses: middle school teachers able to teach high school courses	704 KAR 3:305; KRS 160.348
			Expanded Interdisciplinary Courses: relief from subject-area certification only	704 KAR 3:305; KRS 160.348
			Creation of new roles	KRS 161.180
			School credit for out-of-school learning	704 KAR 3:305
			Relief from ADA-funding	KRS 157.360; 702 KAR 3:270
Taylor County Public	2,607	Town, Distant	Flexibility for course/grade completion	702 KAR 7:125

Schools (2013)			Early College support (KEES money for early college credit)	KRS 164.7874, KRS 161.048, KRS 161.048(2)
			Certification modification allowing teachers to teach beyond current grade level	702 KAR 3:190
			Standards-mastery, classroom of innovation	704 KAR 3:305
			Graduation requirements flexibility, student-based individual learning plan	
Eminence Independent Schools (2013)	818	Rural	Student-member on SBDM	KRS 160.345 (SBDM)
			Year-round schooling	KRS 158.070 (school term)
			Funding flexibility	KRS 157.420 (capital outlay)
			Student teachers as classified staff	KRS 157.320
			Teacher's aide role and title	KRS 161.010(5)
			Certification modification, allowing teachers to teach outside grade level	KRS 161.020
			K20 College transition, KEES money	KRS 1645.7874
			Open door to EIS to all students in KY	KRS 158.12
			Add Grade 13 & 14 to high school	KRS 157.320
Owensboro Public Schools (2014)	5,085	Town	New Tech Academy: College and Career Readiness	
			Funding for K12 + postsecondary	KRS 157.069(2)

			Funding for teachers (longer work day)	KRS 157.390
			Student seat time requirement	KRS 158.070(1)
			Flexibility, Kentucky teacher certification	KRS 161.020
			New school council structure	KRS 160.345
			Non-traditional assessment	705 KAR 4:231(2011)
Owsley County Public Schools (2014)	776	Rural	Extension to Snow Bound e-learning program; Personalizing education plans for every study – focusing on high school graduation; Remove barriers to relevant learning: curriculum, seat time requirements, instruction	KRS 156.160; 702 KAR 7:125; KRS 151B.165; KRS 157.320; 702 KAR 7:125
Trigg County Public Schools (2014)	2,032	Town, Remote	Competency based credit, Expanded learning opportunities, Multiple pathways to graduation, and Innovative learning environments.	703 KAR 4:060; KRD 158.860; KRS 158.6453; KRS 161.020; 704 KAR 3:305 (7); KRS 161.180; KRS 157.360; 704 KRS 3:305 (1)(1)(a); 704 KAR 3:305 (1)(3)(b); NCLB HS Graduation; Non-Regulatory Guidance, page 7, A-13; 30 C.F.R. 200.19; 803 KAR 1:005; KRS 160.345 (2)(a)
Metcalfe County Public	1,657	Rural	Personalized Learning: online and blended learning for performance-based measures	704 KAR 3:305

Schools (2016)			Individual student learning plans, preschool academic activities, middle school teachers to teach at high school level, vocational learning	704 KAR 3:305; 704 KAR 3:410; 16 KAR 2:010
Corbin Independent Schools (2016)	3,138	Town, Remote	Personalized Learning: Corbin School of Innovation. College and career ready pathways – schedule flexibility, innovative instruction	KRS 158.070, KRS 160.107; KRS 156.108;
Boone County Public Schools (2016)	20,716	Suburban	Personalized Learning Capital outlay allotment changes to assist with rapid growth of district	KRS 157.420
			Minimum high school graduation requirement for students earning college credits and earning high marks on ACT; waive requirements to take high school courses; seat time requirement	704 KAR 3:305
			Teacher certification to teach outside certification	KRS 161.020
			Para-professionals' responsibilities	KRS 161.050(5)
			Virtual classes and dual-credit count toward seat time	KRS 158.070
			KEES money for dual-credit	KRS 164.7881
			Adding student representative to alternative school	KRS 160.345

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2006-2013 Senior Account Executive, Education.
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